藤壺

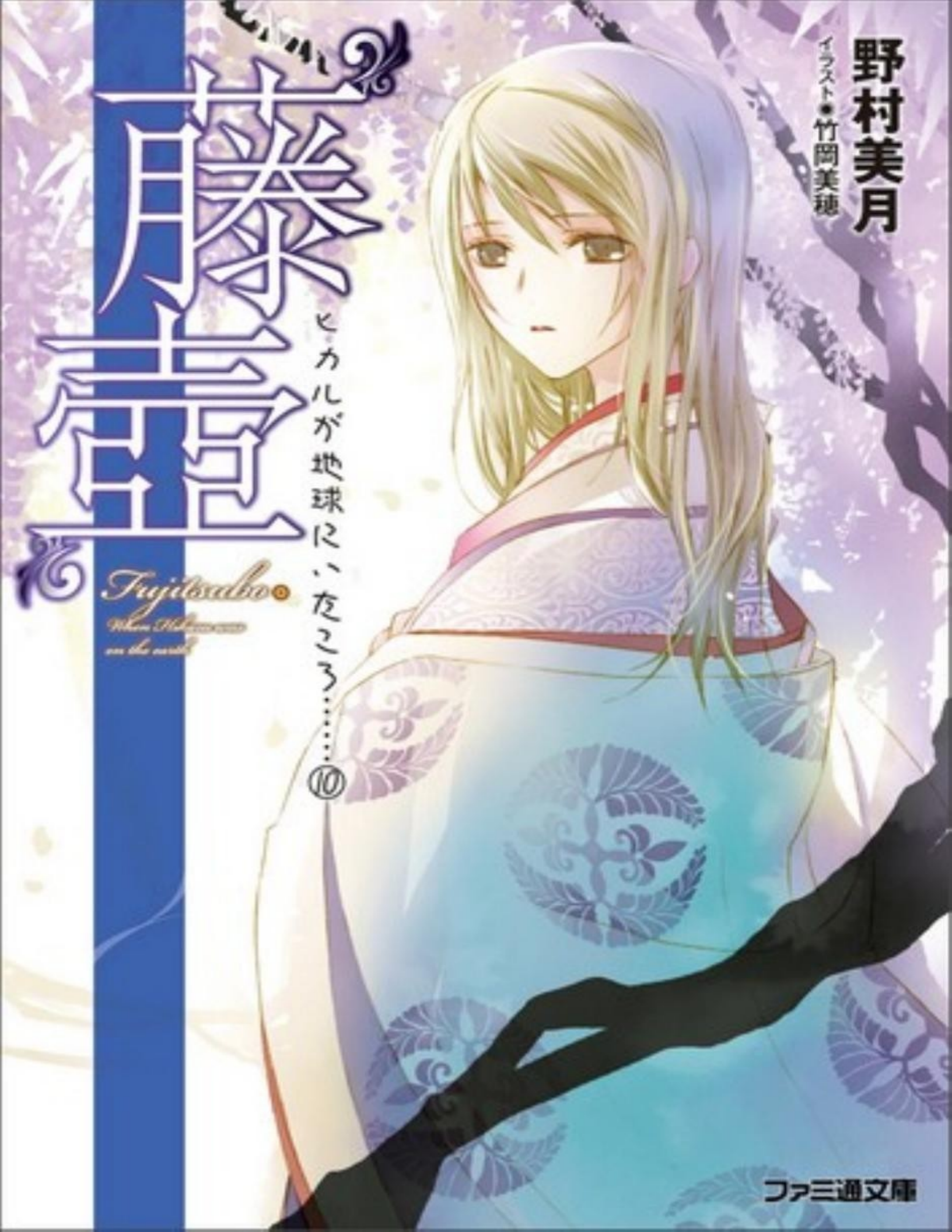
ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑩

Fujitsubo

When Hikaru was on the earth

野村美月

イラスト●竹岡美穂



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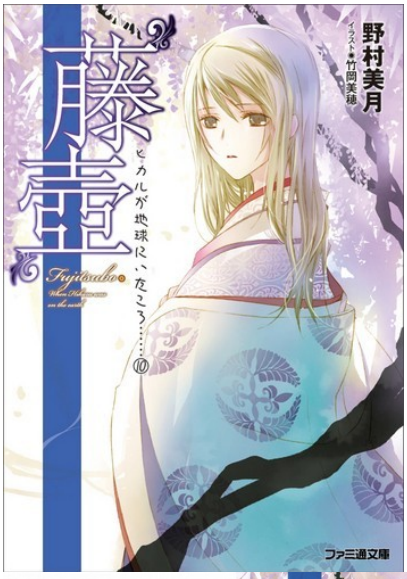

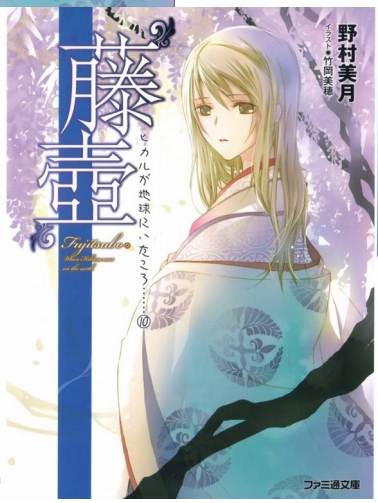

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藤壺
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野村美月

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「わたしとあなたがはじまった場所へ。約束をはたしに来て――」
星光の携帯に届く、「藤乃」から「ヒカル」に宛てたメール。そこには、紫織子の写真が添付されていた……。信州に向かい、藤乃と対面した星光。そこへ藤乃を名乗り紫織子を誘拐した人物の情報がもたらされる。彼女の真意は何なのか。はたされなかった約束とは。ヒカルが命を落とした場所で、すべての秘密が暴かれ、そして――。感動のクライマックス!!

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野村美月

Mizuki Nomura

知る人ぞ知る合唱王国福島出身。幼い頃より「物語」を作るのが好きで、「作家を目指す」「第3回九堂城山卓球場に歌声は響く」で「赤城山卓球場に歌声は響く」で第3回九堂城山大賞小説部門最優秀賞を受賞。趣味、朝寝、夜更かし、卓球、ゲーム全般。主著に「卓球場シリーズ」「Bad! Daddy」「うさ恋。」「文学少女」などがある。

竹岡美穂

Miho Takeoka

7月1日生まれ。東京都出身。埼玉県在住の絵描き屋さん。お茶とウサギと古い博物図鑑、透明水彩と月光荘のスケッチブックをこよなく愛する。「絵を描くか、何か創っていれば大いにしやせ。」
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カバーイラスト　竹岡美穂

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"花散里"　ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑧
"六条"　ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑨
"藤壺"　ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑩
ドレスな僕がやんごとなき方々の家庭教師様な件1～5

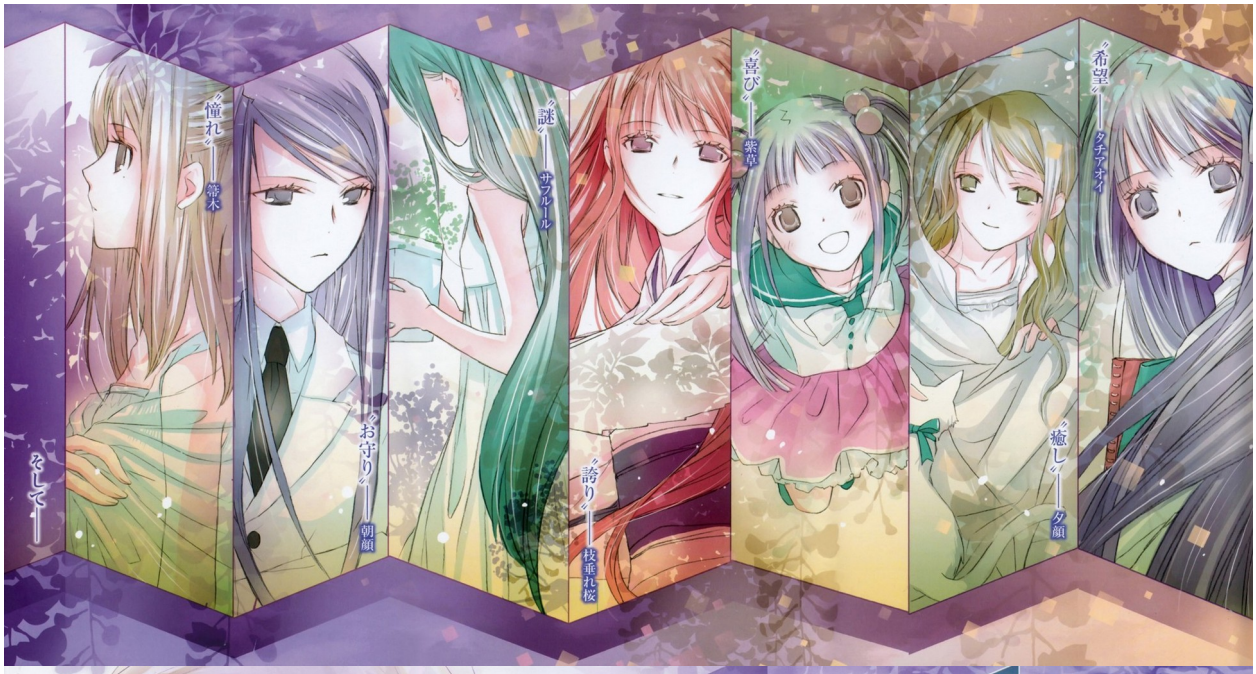
——あたしはほら、あんたのヘリオトロープだから。

藤壺

Fujitsubo

When Hikaru was on the earth

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑩



ぼくは、ぼくを幸せにしてくれた花たちに、優しいさよならをあげたい。
彼女たちが泣いたり苦しんだりせず、晴れやかな気持ちで未来へ進めるように。
ぼくが、地球にいる間に――。

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Prologue

The thin purple Wisterias gently falls, and that person I love embraced it.
His eyes forlorn in the tender light, he stood under the Wisteria Trellis, his supple hands reaching towards the Wisterias dancing in the air, gently embracing them into his chest.
The petite, thin Wisteria petals weakly slid off the gaunt arms of his, and yet he kept embracing them.
He continued on, over and over again, and the thin, purple petals, akin to the lips of a maiden, fell gracefully by his feet.
The petals continued to escape from that person's shoulders.
And that forlorn person vanished afterwards.
Evading anyone's sights, I left a kiss on the Wisteria petals that were embraced by that person's milky, effeminate fingertips.
It was during this chilly spring, amidst the purple Wisterias petals that continued to fall upon us.

This is our secret love, one we cannot say to anyone else.
What sank into the basement of the Wisteria vortex, rendering me breathless was a sweet, anguishing, heartbreaking yet endearing thing, the treasure most cherished by me.

It really is my most treasured.

Chapter 1

"Have you heard of the story of Narcissus?"
The rich, sweet voice pursued Koremitsu from behind.
"He is the son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Liriope, an outstandingly suave man, and girls naturally fell in love with him. Narcissus never accepted anyone's love however; because of that, he was cursed by the vengeful goddess Nemesis, he fell in love with his image reflected on the water surface. Every day, he would look at the water, tormented by the love he could not fulfill, lamented it, was frail as a result, and finally became a noble, slender Narcissus flower."
Koremitsu kept his back slouched as he scowled and moved forward, but that intoxicated voice would follow him around.
"The vengeance and envy of women are really terrifying. They do become completely spiteful once they learn that a handsome young man has no feelings for them. Ahh, now this is really irritating. My back is all chilly now. I do feel a lot happier looking at my pretty face than seeing that ugly woman with a similarly wretched personality within. Do you not agree, Mr Akagi?"
(Ugh, **somebody**, do something about this guy!!)
Koremitsu's face was taut, and he kept groaning within.
He wanted to visit Honoka at the hospital, but Kazuaki kept pestering him. Kazuaki had an infatuation for his half-brother Hikaru, and caused quite a commotion that implicated Yū, the one close to Koremitsu. Back then,

Koremitsu definitely did shout the words “I’ll be your friend in Hikaru’s stead! I’ll stay with you!”
Kazuaki was weeping, “What are you saying”, and looked utterly displeased, but on the next day, he immediately got to Koremitsu’s house.
—I do wish to marry this child I took utmost care of as your wife, Mr Akagi.
With a guiltless smile, he stuffed the cage containing the stoic-looking chameleon to Koremitsu.
He said, “I wish for my dearest Third Princess to be doted well by my good friend, Mr Akagi.”
After seeing the expectant eyes and the blushing face, Koremitsu understood that Kazuaki was really trying to establish a friendship by marrying the chameleon, not out of spite. Thus, Koremitsu could not refuse Kazuaki and took the chameleon in.
He thought Kazuaki would be satisfied with that, but Kazuaki kept it up with excuses like,
”Mr Akagi, you never learned how to take care of chameleons, right? Allow me to teach you.”
He seized the opportunity to barge into Koremitsu’s room.
“Wow, your room is as I thought, a small plain room befitting of a commoner.”
He looked around the room curiously,
“I’ll be going out.”
He statedly indirectly that he hoped for Kazuaki to leave, but the latter,
“Is that so? Then I shall follow you. We are friends after all.”
And nonchalantly followed Koremitsu. Koremitsu tried his best to act indifferent, but Kazuaki did not mind, instead dabbling away with floral knowledge like a certain flower otaku of a ghost, using the exact same sweet, rich voice.
Hikaru had his position taken by his big brother, and kept his usually chatty mouth shut, grimacing beside Koremitsu. Surely he too must be feeling conflicted.
(Was I too anxious to be friends with him? I never thought he’ll be this annoying. It’s really reminding me of Hikaru haunting me. Seriously, you guys are brothers, so alike.)
Koremitsu inadvertently glanced aside to glare at Hikaru, and the latter continued to maintain a grimace.
(It’ll be troubling to got Hikaru’s big brother along to visit Shikibu, so I don’t…)
Honoka mistook Kazuaki, who was crossdressing and selling illegal drugs, as Yū. As a result, she was lured to the basement of a building, locked inside a room, was drugged, and nearly burned to death.
Koremitsu went over to save her, and said the most embarrassing confession he ever made to Honoka.

(Ugh…It’s because Shikibu kept misunderstanding and goes in foolhardy, saying nonsense like she hopes that I dump her properly before she dies, or else she can’t ascend to the afterlife—

—You’re one huge idiot!!

—Honoka Shikibu is not an ordinary classmate to me!!!

(Ahh~~~)
Koremitsu resisted the impulse to yell out loud.
How was he supposed to face Honoka after saying such an embarrassing line? With Kazuaki following him, he was really troubled, not knowing what to do.
“Eh, Mr Akagi, you are headed to the hospital Honoka Shikibu is at.”
“Ack.”
A refreshing sweet voice rang at his ears, and he was taken aback.
(This guy looks like a doofus, but he’s unexpectedly sharp.)
I guess it’s to be expected of Hikaru’s brother.
“Wait, a, second, Mr Akagi! Did you have sex with that Honoka Shikibu because of that little commotion? That is an illusion, a carrot dangling in front of you! That girl with those raised feisty eyes will kick you hard for every little quarrel here! A violent kangaroo! I utterly object to this as a friend! I object! I object!”
“Just go back already!!”
Koremitsu yelled as he pushed away Kazuaki’s face, the latter having brought his face close.
In any case, did Kazuaki really have any right to criticize Honoka?
(You’re the scary, hideous one.)
However—
Not all that happened the past few days were caused by Kazuaki’s ploy.
Koremitsu recalled the message he received in the morning, and a chill suddenly arose in his chest.

—“The child in Fujino Mikado’s belly is Lord Hikaru’s.”

Hikaru’s face paled as he lowered his head, peering at the little screen from Koremitsu’s side; he was left speechless, his face frozen.
Kazuaki had insisted *“I did not do it.”* , insisting vehemently, *“I have no interest in either the Rose faction or the Wisteria faction. I do have interest in Hikaru’s child, but I will not go out of my way to inform everyone.”*
And he said, the messages titled “The women around Lord Hikaru’ that slandered the women involved with Hikaru was not sent by him.
He did not put the ink-covered umbrella in Yū’s room, and did not rile up Asai and the rest to turn them on each other. He merely lit the incense when he locked Honoka in the room, and did not set fire.

Kazuaki did not appear to be lying.
There was another ‘Poppy’ other than him.
It was likely that the same sender was the one who stated that Fujino was pregnant with Hikaru’s child.
(Who did it? What’s the motive for doing such despicable things?)
For Hikaru, his relationship with his stepmother Fujino was the biggest secret.
Even after he became a ghost, Hikaru would not talk too much about this with Koremitsu. Other than the actual parties involved, it appeared only his cousin Asai knew what happened between the duo…but that girl called Mikoto Ono, the girl with the clear eyes who called herself Fujino’s messenger, might know a thing or two…
Fujino was pregnant at this point, and in the following month, Hikaru’s little brother or sister might be born.
Hikaru concluded to Koremtisu that he could not possibly be the father, that during this time, he was clearly rejected by Fujino, and never did anything that would make her pregnant.
Fujino typically kept her distance from Hikaru, and thus, despite such rumors running rampant, they probably would be deemed as baseless.
However, Hikaru looked despondent and heavy-hearted as he lowered his head, staring at the message, his eyes looking anguished.
(How is anyone supposed to calm down now?)
Just thinking of those messages flying around would be enough to unsettle anyone.
Koremitsu wanted to find a way to catch the culprit.
So that such pranks would never happen again.
While he was scowling hard, gritting his teeth as he sank into deep though,
“Mr Akagi, you do not have to give such a troubled look. If you wish to break up with Miss Shikibu, I can pretend to be your lover, and she will back away immediately.”
“Seriously—”
The brooding time was immediately snapped by Kazuaki.
(Yeah. If I’m to go out dating with this perverted big brother, Shikibu won’t be the only one terrified, any girl will be thoroughly scared.)
The image of Kazuaki beaming and blaring at Honoka’s face *“Mr Akagi’s girlfriend is **me**, so you do not have to appear now. Shoo shoo~. Ahaha, that is quite a sad face you are making~”* appeared in Koremitsu’s face, and he was overwhelmed with a migraine.
The hospital appeared in front of him, but he was pondering seriously perhaps he should first grab Kazuaki by the neck and drag the latter back to the Mikados.

“Ah.”

While Koremitsu was in serious thought, Hikaru let out a little murmur.

A girl with slightly curled long hair, slender body and a fleeting presence stood in front of the hospital doors.
(Yū…!)
Koremitsu too was taken aback.
(Why is Yū at the hospital Shikibu's at now—)
It appeared that Yū had been waiting for Koremitsu to arrive. She approached with her usual forlorn expression, the white skirt swaying slightly above her slender ankles, the soft strands of hair swaying gently in the frigid winds.
She gave the same fleeting presence as the one when she locked herself in the apartment. Koremitsu watched her with bated breath.
"Ahh, no!! How scary!! Yū is going to be violent at me again!!~"
Kazuaki ducked behind Koremitsu's back.
One had to wonder if Kazuaki was traumatized after the incident when he slandered Hikaru and was slapped by Yū, or that he was being dramatic for the sake of it. In any case—
(Hey, big brother, I really want to beat you up here.)
Koremitsu's shoulders were quivering as he fumed.
"Koremitsu, hang in there."
Hikaru gently encouraged.
Koremitsu tried his best to calm down, ignoring Kazuaki grabbing his shirt with both hands from behind as he asked Yū,
"What's going on? Why are you here.?"
Yū gave a surprised look at Kazuaki, and with those fleeting eyes staring at Koremitsu, she whispered,
"I came…to visit Miss Shikibu."
"I-is that so?"
Koremitsu was quietly taken aback.
Were Yū and Honoka on such good terms that the former would visit the latter? They probably did not say anything more than a few words…
"Miss Shikibu…has already been discharged."
"Really? I heard that she was at the hospital in the morning."
Yū stared at Koremitsu silently, her eyes causing the latter to be a little breathless.
"I suppose a family member would be picking her up, but…she went back."
"Why?"
"…"
Yū remained silent.
It seemed Koremitsu could not press on any further.
Yū stared back at Koremitsu, her expression as poised as she was the previous day when she asked, *"'is the date still valid'?"* .
At that moment, "…Yeah" , Koremitsu answered, "I got a few things I want to ask you about, Yū" .
Back then, Yū gave a faint smile, whispering, *"I understand."*
He had to talk to Yū about Honoka.

(—in such a situation?)
Hikaru watched over Yū and Koremitsu from the side, his breath bated. The big brother clinging by the back, poking his head out from the side, looking somewhat fearful and vengeful at Yū.
It was impossible no matter how he thought about it.
However, Yū appeared to be waiting for Koremitsu to speak, her eyes never did leave him.
(Yū did meet Shikibu after all…what did they talk about in the ward room?)
Curious as he was, Koremitsu was unable to ask.
Just when his heart was racing due to anxiety—
The cellphone in his pocket vibrated.
“Woah!”
Koremitsu’s shoulders inadvertently quivered.
“Sorry.”
He hastily grabbed his cellphone from his pocket, had a look at the message, and found it to be another anonymous one.
(Again?)
Koremitsu’s face got grim immediately.
The title of the message was ‘the promised…’.
“!”
Once he opened it, an unmitigated chill seemed to rush through his spine, causing him to widen his eyes.

“Hikaru, I shall offer the purest, speckless Comfrey in your garden to revive you.
Come to the place where you and I first began.
To the place where you betrayed me.
Time to fulfill the promise.”

Hikaru, staring at the phone from the side, let out a gasp.
The message was signed off with the name ‘Fujino’—Hikaru’s stepmother, the woman he so loved most!
Furthermore, there was a photo attached to the message, one of an elementary school girl with her hair tied in twintails, her eyes closed as she laid on the floor.
“Shiiko…!”
Koremitsu’s heart jumped, his mind blank.
Shioriko was barefooted, her milky legs exposed from her fluffy knee-length skirt to her ankles, and her pretty pink fingernails could be seen clearly.
“Koremitsu, Shiiko is!”
“Ack, what do I do now?”
A groan was eked out from Koremitsu’s mouth.
Kazuaki and Yū too did realize something was abnormal, showing perturbed looks.
Koremitsu instinctively made a call to Shioriko’s cellphone.

The response from the phone was a voicemail, ‘the cellphone you are attempting to reached may not be switched on, or may be beyond reception.
“Ugh!”
Koremitsu then called home. His aunt Koharu picked it up.
“What’s Shiiko doing now!?”
He yelled, his teeth practically gnashing.
“What’s with that out of a sudden? Shiiko left home after breakfast. She hasn’t returned home.”
Koharu answered.
“Also, there’s a package for you. Someone called Fujino sent it.”
“!”
Both Hikaru and Koremitsu’s shoulders shivered in unison.
“I’ll be right back.”
Koremitsu hung up the phone, and made a mad dash home.
“Wait, Mr Akagi! Please do not leave me with Yū alone~!”
Kazuaki’s yell could be heard from behind, but Koremitsu was not in the mood to be bothered with that.
♢
♢ ♢
Upon seeing Koremitsu return home, sweating profusely and panting furiously, Koharu scowled.
“Where’s Shiiko?”
“Not home yet.”
“The package?”
“Over there.”
She pointed her chin at the *chabudai*.
“It was placed at the corridor. The sender only left a name, not an address. What happened, Koremitsu? Did something happen? Is it something to do with Shiiko not being back for lunch?”
Koremitsu was so impatient he waved off Koharu’s question, and ripped off the packaging hastily. Written on the surface was the neat handwriting of a woman, with the recipient being ‘To Mr Koremitsu Akagi’, addressed to his house. The back was as Koharu said, just the name ‘Fujino’ written on it.
Soon after, Koremitsu found a pair of stolen girls shoes inside. They were little track shoes with pink shoelaces, the shoes Shioriko just wore!
Koharu too sounded agitated.
“These are Shiiko’s shoes. Koremitsu, explain what’s going on here!”
“!! Shiiko got abducted.”
“What did you say!? What’s going on here?”
Koremitsu too did not know what was going on. Why was Shioriko abducted?

I shall offer the purest, speckless Comfrey in your garden to revive you.

(What the heck!?)

Koremitsu's eyes were bloodshot, his rage directed at the one who did this. He took out the namecard of Mikoto Ono, which he kept in his student notebook the entire time, and dialled the number written on it.
To meet Hikaru's stepmother—Fujino Mikado.
◇
◇ ◇
Mikoto immediately picked up the call.
Koremitsu held in the rampaging emotions inside him as he stated that a person calling herself Fujino abducted an elementary school girl living in his house, even forwarding the message with the photo over. Once she heard of it, Mikoto remained silent for a while on the other end of the phone.
Soon after, she calmly noted,
"We cannot call the police right now. I shall get someone to retrieve little Shiiko."
She hung up, and after a while, called back,
"Miss Fujino is currently at the resort in Shinshu. I explained the situation to her, and the culprit's request is...may I ask if you are able to
make a trip with me to her?"
"...That person and I...first met at the village in Shinshu, my mother's birthplace."
Hikaru muttered with a feeble voice.

—Come to the place where you and I first began.

The contents of the message appeared in Koremitsu's mind, and he felt his gut shrink as he answered,
"Got it. Where are we meeting?"
Koremitsu then told Koharu that he would definitely bring Shioriko back, and begged her not to call the police, and not to tell his grandfather who was away at a *Go* tournament. With a solemn look, Koharu told Koremitsu,
"I'm calling the police if Shiiko isn't back home by tomorrow."
If the grandfather was to know about it, surely Koremitsu would end up beaten. However, this old man would become a fool when dealing with Shioriko, and surely he would not wait for Koremitsu to bring Shioriko back.
Koremitsu was mentally prepared for his jaw to be snapped, a rib or two broken, and he proceeded to ride on the black sedan Mikoto prepared for him.
While on the sedan, he gave Asai a call.
Koremitsu notified Asai of what happened to Shioriko, that he was going to meet Fujino. Asai gasped,
"I've yet to call the police. I got the Mikados to help me figure out where Shiiko is."
"What am I supposed to do then?"

“Can you help me check on the identity of the Poppy again?”
He informed Asai that other than Kazuaki, there was another one calling herself the ‘Poppy’, and Asai’s breathing became grim.
“And just in case, help me check if Kuze’s involved in this too.”
Shioriko’s biological father, Sōichirō Kuze, wanted to have Shioriko in a place where he could control. Now that his past crimes were exposed, he was convicted by the public as a result, and probably was unable to deal with this daughter born out of wedlock. However, such a possibility was not impossible.
Asai’s tone was stern, and she answered,
“Understood. I shall have Tōjō assist as well. If anything happens, contact me immediately.”
“…I’ll leave it to you.”
Koremitsu’s heart was being ripped apart, and he lowered his head.
“Who do you think I am? Trust me.”
Asai muttered, and hung up the phone.
Hikaru’s face paled as he watched Koremitsu and Asai’s conversation.
Seated opposite Koremitsu, Mikoto Ono too—
Watched Koremitsu with those poised eyes under the neat, trimmed black hair.
There was a space between the comfortable back seats and the driver seat, so the conversation they would have would not be overheard.
There was practically no tremor to be felt in the car, and it felt as though they were riding on a glider on the road. Koremitsu gritted his teeth, the hands on his thighs clenched as he lowered his head, his face frozen.
In the meantime, his phone kept receiving messages.

“I grew these blue-purple Lilies of the Nile as I reminisced about you.
The way their thin stems straightened in the bright moonlight really resembled you, and I kissed every single one of them.
The Lilies of the Nile are also known as African Lilies.
Their floral language is ‘the most beloved’.
I really hope that I could groom you, my most beloved, lock you within a beautiful box, and hide you from everyone else.
And then, Hikaru…
I will never be able to see your betrayal.”

“Everyone around you finds it unbelievable as to why you are being treated so coldly.
Why exactly would a person beautiful and spirited be rejected with aloof eyes and spiteful words?
Whenever I was being advised on this, my heart would be angsty within.
I wanted to yell, yell, yell, until my throat became hoarse.
No, no, no, this actually is not the case.
I actually did not wish to avert the clear expression of yours.

I wanted to respond to those sweet words of yours with the best smile I could ever give."

"I knew right from the beginning that our love was a forbidden cardinal sin. It was not permitted by this world, and no one around us would bless us. My body felt like it was cut, stabbed through and burned–it was a tragic romance and bitter love that was accompanied with sadness and despair.
I definitely must not let anyone else know, and I will continue to love him in this darkness where the moonlight cannot shine into. Did we not lock our fingers and swear?
That this was a secret for a lifetime."

"I tried to hate.
I tried to show disdain.
But I could not.
The fact was that it was determined you were my 'beloved' the moment you said the first beautiful line to me.
Yes, my beloved is always you."

"I suppose you did come visit me in the spur of the moment, thinking of those moments when our hearts were linked, when we spent our time in such passion and happiness. My hands were twined with yours, our legs locked together, and there was the melting, aching sweet despair."

"Hikaru,
I never did forgive you.
I will never forgive you for only looking at others when you should have been looking at me, and being blissful.
I will never forgive you for escaping alone from the world that was just the two of us.
I will never forgive you for loving me, swearing an oath of love with me, hurting me, and deserting me.
I will never forgive you, for letting out of the clasped fingers as you showed that beautiful, cruel smile.

"Your 'most beloved' should be me.
For that is because I am the one closest to you, the one who got hurt for you, the one who suffered for you, the one who changed her fate for you
That is why, your 'most beloved', should be me."

“I was the only one who knew of your final moments.
I was the one who ended your life.
Confusing others, yet incomprehensible.
The one beloved by all the flowers—Hikaru Mikado.
You sin will never be forgiven even once you die!”

“Hey, Hikaru.
On that stormy night, I may have ended your life.
But I regretted it.
So, I buried those wretched women who stained you, and brought a new sacrifice over, towards the place where our hearts passed, the place where it all began, and ended.
So that you shall be reborn in this world again.”

The neatly arranged words of love on the screen seemed to give off a rich floral scent, yet they were filled with chilling, vengfeul words, hinting at the attack that happened on that stormy night, the confession that she killed Hikaru by the riverside—. All the messages were indicated to be sent by ‘Fujino’
Whenever he slid the screen, words would appear.
Those words were murmuring directly into Koremitsu’s ears, digging into his eyes, lips, and his nostrils, even teasing his inner heart, corroding it little by little.
It felt highly discomforting, rather than sweet. Koremitsu’s back shivered a few times.
Certainly, the one sending such messages was not normal.
(Is Shiiko alright?)

“To the place where you betrayed me.
Time to fulfill the promise.”

Koremitsu swallowed his bitter saliva as he read the message that was sent along with Shioriko’s photo, and Hikaru groaned from the side.
“The promise that person and I made can never be fulfill, for…”
His voice got increasingly feeble.
Koremitsu too gripped the cellphone firmly.
No matter how many times he replied, he was left at the voicemail. The messages kept coming, and Koremitsu was so anxious his throat was about to break.
“Damn it!”
He muttered, and a calm voice replied,
“We are arriving.”
Koremitsu lifted his head, and saw Mikoto Ono’s poised, calm smile.
It was not the emotionless face of a doll, but a colorless, transparent expression that could calm an agitated heart. If she was actually showing

such a face on purpose, surely it was a lot of self-restraint that the highly emotional Koremitsu could not imagine.
Soon after getting on the car, Koremitsu heard that Mikoto was the maid serving Fujino's family.
And he learned that Mikoto was studying at an all-girls school in the city, a senior, 2 years older than Koremitsu.
Though there was an age difference between her and her master Fujino, they were close since young, and Mikoto knew about Hikaru from Fujino's mouth.
Hikaru used to say that 'Mikoto' was the one that person was really concerned with.
"…S-so Shiiko really wasn't taken by Hikaru's stepmom?"
Koremitsu's eyes were grim, and with that gentle, refreshing voice, Mikoto calmly answered,
"Miss Fujino will never send such an obvious message. She never will reveal her feelings except when conversing with me. This also goes for Mr hikaru."
Hikaru's shoulders quivered, his eyes tentative and intimidated as he looked over at Mikoto.
"Miss Fujino and Mr Hikaru's relationship will never be officially recognized. The two of them can never be together. Both of them should know about it."
"Because she's his stepmom?"
Hikaru's expression was gradually clouded, causing Koremitsu unease as he asked,, and Mikoto whispered,
"That is not all. Hikaru's mother, Miss Kiriyo, is the half-sister of Miss Fujino, same father, different mothers. They are related by blood as aunt and nephew."
Aunt and nephew!
Koremitsu quietly gulped.
Hikaru's face was slowly contorted into anguish.
(Aunt…but yeah…when I saw that stepmom at the funeral, I thought she was his older sister.)
They resembled so much to such an extent.
It was the same when he saw Fujino kiss the Wisterias at Shioriko's house, the same when he met Fujino at the calligraphy contest held at the Gonomiyas.
It was as if Hikaru had swapped genders—
How could such a pair, so strikingly similar, not be blood-related in any way?
(But the aunt and nephew can't get married?)
Koremitsu's heart was ostensibly at knife-point, a chill rampant in him.
Surely this was why Hikaru never spoke up? That he was so frenetic whenever he spotted Fujino, saying that he could not be here, that he kept begging Koremitsu to head to a place where he could not see her.
For he knew how grave a sin they had committed.

He fell in love with the woman who became his father's wife, and even bonded physically with the body of his blood-related aunt. Even in the other world, he continued to feel the guilt of yearning for her, and surely, that was
why Hikaru showed such a gloomy expression.
Hikaru committed two great taboos with Fujino!
He bit his lips, staring at the hollow, despondent eyes.
Koremitsu too went silent, his expression tense,
Mikoto then calmly continued,
"It was when Mr Hikaru was 5 years old, when they were living at his mother's ancestral residence in Shinshu that they met…Mr Hikaru's mother was born from Miss Fujino's father, only of a different lady, and she was not recognized as a result. However…Miss Fujino always viewed Miss Kiriyo as an older sister, and really respected her, so she wanted to see Miss Kiriyo's son. Miss Fujino once smiled, telling me that Mr Hikaru is pretty, innocent, and cute, and that she promised to God that she would get him a wonderful angel. After that, whenever Mr Hikaru paid a visit to the ancestral home during summer and spring break, Miss Fujino would visit him. They would play by the river, picnic in the forest, and every year, once Spring arrived, they would spend the time together, viewing the Wisterias—once they wilted, they will look for for other similar flowers…I suppose during that time, they were aunt and nephew on very good terms."
Fujino's home was so close Hikaru's mother's, so whenever Fujino stayed at the home of Hikaru's mother, it appeared that she would be there all day. Perhaps she felt pity for her nephew, whose mother passed away, and who had mutterings behind his back by his father's family in Tokyo, saying 'The daughter of a mistress gave birth became a mistress that bore a child'. Perhaps she was simply delighted to be taking care of her cute angelic nephew, staring up and admiring her.
"…Never…did I once view her as my aunt."
Hikaru muttered bitterly.
Mikoto could not hear Hikaru's voice. She continued calmly.
Hikaru's father, the head of the Mikados, fell in love with Fujino on first sight, for the latter resembled Hikaru's deceased mother so much.
He proposed to Fujino, hoping that she would marry him once she graduated from college.
"When Mr Hikaru's father made this request, Miss Fujino…"
Hikaru lowered his head despondently.
Mikoto abruptly went silent.
"…"
Mikoto, who till this point narrated everything stoically as a bystander, appeared to be pondering for the first time, causing Koremitsu to wonder if Fujino did lower her head as feebly as Hikaru did, what sort of feelings she had when Hikaru's father proposed to him.
However, Mikoto regained her poise immediately.

“Mr Hikaru’s father was always an honest person. Miss Fujino’s parents too wished for this, and so she, having realized how arduous it will be being the partner of the Mikados’ head, made her decision to proceed.”
But this incident utterly ruptured the relationship between Hikaru and Fujino.
What would the feeling be like, to have the woman dearest to him became his stepmother, and they were leaving under the same roof?
She never did talked with him except when they had to, and she did not meet him in the eyes. Hikaru too felt anguished to be with Fujino as he was, and for that reason, he left home. In spite of them, he still yearned for the one dearest to him, Fujino.
But, what was Fujino thinking?
While Mikoto kept explaining, the messages were sent to Koremitsu’s cellphone, boldly stating the utter infatuation ‘Fujino’ had for Hikaru.
She loved him so much she was suffering.
That even though she had to bear the guilt, she could not hold in those feelings.
She wanted to sink with him to the bottom of basin filled with Wisterias.
However, the real **Fujino** was—
“It appears that we have arrived.”
Mikoto mentioned, and Koremitsu noticed that the car has stopped.
The elderly chauffeur opened the door.
The outside was still dazzlingly bright..
But the refreshing was icy, chilling.
A Western-styled mansion stood with the snowy white sky and the ostentiously grey and white forest as the backdrop.
A rustling could be heard from the trees, swaying with the wind. Koremitsu listened to these sounds as he stepped onto the damp,grassland.
It appeared they were at the atrium of this mansion.
And perhaps, without Koremitsu knowing, they went through the main doors.
(Did Hikaru…spend his final moments here…?)
Hikaru too looked gloomy and forlorn as he stared at what appeared to be a house out of a fairy tale.
Suddenly, the front doors were opened to the sides.
“!”
Hikaru shuddered.
Koremitsu too gasped.
The little feet covered by the white sandals gently landed upon the stone floor.
Swaying in the air was the thin, blue-grey skirt and the faint violet shawl on the shoulders, and the white blouse clung to her body, emphasizing her shockingly thin upper body.
The faint brown strands of hair absorbed the cold sunlight, giving off an alluring golden glitter that spread from atop the shawl; the slender white

nape stood elegantly, and atop it was a petite face with an anguished look on it.
The eyes were filled with melancholy, the face pale, the petal-like lips giving off a destitute presence.

(Hikaru—no.)

He understood she was not Hikaru, but he was still bewildered.
The friend stood beside Koremitsu, looking despondent.
That beautiful woman had the same face as that face of his.
She was like a goddess dressed in a *Hagaromo*, amidst the petals of the falling Wisteria, descending from the skies—
She was such a beautiful woman, one could have a hallucination of her being otherworldly.
Hikaru's stepmother—Fujino Mikado lifted her head at Koremitsu, saying with an utterly anguished voice.
"I have been waiting for you for a while…Mr Akagi."

Chapter 2

It was said that she was about to give birth in December, this young woman with an anguished face was seated on the sofa, not looking like someone who was about to give birth.

Her upper body was slender, and another reason for that was the skirt and shawl covering her belly; however, the gloomy expression practically lamented everything, and unbefitting of the woman carrying a dazzling life in her belly.

The prettiest flower in the world.

Certainly, this description was as appropriate as it could get. The tenderness and elegance of her beauty was masked with gloom, and it was because of that gloom that made her prettier, more akin to something out of a fantasy.

“I have been waiting for you for a while.”

The helpless, expectant eyes back when she welcomed Koremitsu were now looking at her slender, white fingers.

Her despondent eyes were lacking in life, like a hollow abyss, only showing some life when looking at Koremitsu from time to time.

Koremitsu was seated on the sofa facing Fujino.

Mikoto in turn was seated at the sofa perpendicular to the duo, and Hikaru was standing right opposite her, facing Koremitsu sidelong.

Like Fujino, Hikaru’s face was pale and in anguish, his eyes showing the same gloom. It appeared their hearts were linked, that he too was able able to sense the pain and anguish she had.

“…This morning, I too did receive messages signed using **my name**.”

Fujino informed Koremitsu with that beautiful yet gloomy voice.

Koremitsu requested for Fujino to show her phone, and the words shown on the screen were practically the same as the one sent to Koremitsu.

The only difference was that the messages sent to Koremitsu were calling for

‘Fujino’, but the messages sent to Fujino were addressed as ‘I’, ‘I’ have to start over at that place again, ‘I’ have to go out again tonight, actions to prompt her.

“I have no clue as to the incidents in the message…and I do not understand what it means by ‘that place’ and ‘start over’…”

Fujino’s eyes lowered as she whispered.

The white, speckless face looked increasingly fleeting, perhaps because her face was already pale.

Did she really not have a clue? Or was it that she was masking her true thoughts out of fear out revealing the scandal involving her and her nephew?

Fujino’s voice and expression were too tragic, tranquil that Koremitsu could not determine.

Hikaru too could only stare at Fujino in pain. He never spoke ever since they got here, and it appeared he was about to vanish at any given moment as he chose not to give any opinion, merely rooted to the spot.
The setting sun outside the window was starting to grow dark.
At this moment—
Hikaru suddenly widened her eyes.
He stared at the window that was dyed golden.
No,
Not the window.
Hikaru was staring at the silver knife placed beside the window, between the jewel box and the china dolls.
It was as big as a fruit knife, and the hilt and grip were finely ornamented. Looking at how it was placed, it appeared to be a decoration rather than for use. However, it seemed different compared to the jewel box and the doll, and appeared rather intimidating. However, Koremitsu probably would not have such a huge reaction if Hikaru did not.
(What's with that knife?)
Hikaru was still staring at it.
His face showed anxiety and shock, watching it intently with bated breath.
Soon after, Hikaru's face slowly became that of deeper anguish. He looked away from it despondently, and never looked at it again, merely keeping his head low, biting his lower lip.
Koremitsu felt restless, frustration and apprehension rising up his throat.
Both Hikaru and Fujino were hiding something.
Koremitsu was guessing that they had something they did not wish to talk about.
But at this moment, Shioriko was in danger.
With a stiff, stern voice, Koremitsu said to Fujino,
"That night, when Hikaru drowned in the river, he sent me a message telling me that you sent a message, that he's going out later."
◇
◇ ◇
"Why is Aoi here?"
Asai gave Tōjō an utterly berating look.
The field could be seen from the student council room of Heian Academy, and the sunset shrouded upon it. The light was lit in this room, and inside the room were the most powerful figure in the school, the master of the room—
the student council president Asai Saiga, Tōjō, a year older than Asai, and deeply involved with the Mikado Corporation, and there was Tōjō's cousin, Asai's childhood friend—Aoi.
Furthermore.
"Miss Tsuyako, Miss Oumi, may I ask why are you here?"
Asai's temples were throbbing more than before.
"Tōjō, did you inform them of this?"

Asai treated Tōjō as an equal, despite the latter being older by a year.
“Aoi just so happened to be at my house when you contacted me.”
Like Asai, Tōjō too was showing a displeased look. Aoi popped out from the side, looking serious.
“I was helping Lapis with her labor. Please allow me to help with Shiiko’s matter.”
Tōjō probably was easily coerced by Aoi when the latter said something “If you will not let me go, I will never talk to you again, big brother Shungo.” It was Asai’s miscalculation that Aoi was at Tōjō’s house, but the latter was utterly spineless. Unlike her meek, demure appearance however, Aoi was a stubborn girl who would never back down once she made up her mind. As a childhood friend, Asai knew this best…
(Guess I got no choice.)
Just when Asai sighed.
“Your Matriarch Asa, I shall help too.”
“You thought you could exclude me? How cruel of you, Miss Asai.”
Hiina and Tsuyako too chimed in heartily. One had to wonder what sort of means they used to find out.
“Please do not underestimate my information network.”
“Miss Oumi informed me.”
(Goodness…)
Asai again sighed—only for someone unexpected to open the door and pop in, and the sigh got stuck in her throat.
“Do you mind if I join in too~~~, Asai?”
All the people gathered in the student council office turned towards the door in unison.
Tōjō looked on grimly, Aoi’s face froze, and Tsuyako shrank back in fear.
Hiina merely widened her eyes, and showed a boyish chuckle.
Asai’s eyes were coldly staring at Kazuaki Mikado.
He, who wailed and bawled so hard as he sat on the floor, ruining his formation and lipstick in the process, interjected calmly, ostensibly having forgotten what happened the previous day. One had to suspect his mental makeup.
“You are investigating Shioriko Wakagi’s abduction, am I correct? I wish to have Mr Akagi owe me a favor. Ah, no, I suppose it is strange to put it this way. Perhaps I should have said that I wish to show my sincerity after all? Ah, but you have to tell Mr Akagi that I did provide some information. I suppose it is useless if I am to explain this myself, no? Also, I do feel that all of us here do have similarities. Mr Shungo is someone who cannot have anything less than a virgin for a girlfriend, no?”
“Ugh!”
Tōjō’s face cringed.
“It seems Asai too will remain a virgin forever.”
“!”
Asai too was speechless.

Kazuaki then chirped,
“See. We do get along.”
“Do not associated us with you!” “As if we do!”
Asai and Tōjō refute resonated in unison.
“Aoi too, I hope you not hate me here—I shall pretend that your cold rejection towards me never happened before.”
“…Now you are putting this strangely. It sounds like I am the one who did such cruel things to you, Mr Kazuaki.”
Aoi muttered.
Kazuaki then continued,
“However, I cannot accept Tsuyako no matter what. Tsuyako is no longer a virgin, and also a large ugly woman. Those breasts too are lewd and unappealing, and I am embarrassed to be with you. Ah, yes, you can simply stay away from my sights. Great, I shall do this from now on. I shall not look at you, Tsuyako, so do not enter my sights nor talk to me. You have to ignore me, and I shall do the same.”
“…Should I be happy here?”
For a long time, Tsuyako was bounded mentally and tortured by Kazuaki.
The one hailed as an absolute beauty by many showed a conflicted look.
“I suppose it is fine to have Mr Kazuaki help—”
“Why, thank you. I do have such uncouth girls like you with huge breasts, but I will thank you.”
The self-centered Kazuaki incited a murderous vibe from Asai, and Tōjō’s face remained constricted.
Hiina was the only one grinning away, not minding Kazuaki’s presence at all.
“Well then, I shall begin. I did ask the counter girl who wanted to be my lover, who placed the blade and thumbtacks in Yū’s room. That girl’s name, well, it is either Miss Sawachi or Sawamura, but anyway, I heard what are the characteristics of the one who called herself my representative. Let me think, about 15-16 years old, 150cm or so…”
Kazuaki enthusiastically provided the information; it appeared he really wanted to assist Koremitsu.
Asai had many issues with this, but first, she held her emotions in check as she paid attention to the exact rich, sweet voice Hikaru had.
Who was able to obtain the information in all the chain messages?
Who was able to obtain a chopper from the Home Economics room, pins from the floral arrangement club, and slipped them into Asai and Aoi’s drawers?
Who exactly did the school surveillance cameras catch during that period?
The culprit had to be one of the people in school.
And not just an ordinary student.
It had to be of someone with quite a family prestige—someone close to the Mikados.
Someone who could control the students, and obtain information.

And despite that, the presence being low-key.
Using all the information at hand, and after proposing and refuting several possibilities, there was only one possible person.
“Is that…”
Tsuyako muttered, her voice clearly rattled.
“That girl…?”
“I cannot believe it either…”
Aoi’s face too showed surpirse.
“I am surprised too, but this deduction matches the testimony from that counter girl at the hospital. About 150cm tall, petite, a round face, curly hair that reaches the shoulders.”
Hiina said, her eyes poised and sharp. Asai herself was quietly confident.

That person was from Koremitsu’s class—
◇
◇ ◇
“It’s already past 5…”
Once she saw that the sky outside the window was dark, Honoka checked the time on her cellphone, and muttered to herself,
(How’s…Akagi doing right now? Did he meet Miss Kanai…?)
She was seated in front of the desk in her room, tucking her legs onto the swivel chair, her forehead on her knees. Back then, she would eagerly swivel around on the chair, but on this day, she was not in the mood to do so.
(I really want to give Akagi a call…I really want to talk to him directly…)
However, she already made a certain bet in the hospital with Yū in the hospital, so she could not call.
Yū probably would be calling sometime soon regarding the result…however, Honoka’s cellphone showed no activity, and not knowing whether it was a good thing or not, she could only cup her knees firmly.
At this moment, a pompous melody rang from the cellphone on the table.
“He-hello!”
Honoka picked it up without affirming who it was, answering with a shrill voice.
But the voice that entered the ears was not Yū’s.
It was an older woman…
“Michiru’s…mother…?”
◇
◇ ◇
“That night, when Hikaru drowned in the river, he sent me a message telling me that you sent a message, that he’s going out later.”
Koremitsu glared at Fujino, gauging her response.
Hikaru hurriedly leaned forward,
“Koremitsu!”

He pleaded. His eyes looking frenetic, ostensibly wishing for Koremitsu not to mention it.
However, Fujino's lowered eyebrows quivered slightly, and with those gloomy eyes, she watched Koremitsu quietly, whispering,
"I did not write a letter to Hikaru."
The pale face showed pain and anguish, just like before, but she did not seem to falter because of Koremitsu's words. She slowly shrank back, and it appeared all emotion, other than anguish and depression, had vanished from her heart.
Mikoto too,
"…:"
Showed no sign of shock or anxiety on her calm Japanese doll-like face.
Never once did she interrupt Koremitsu and Fujino's conversation, only listening to them attentively.
Hikaru was the only one staring at Koremitsu, his eyes frantically moving around, his lips quivering, wanting to say something, but he seemed lost, not knowing what to do.
(It's like Fujino's the dead one here…)
Compared to Hikaru, she was lacking in response—no. Fujino practically showed no response at all. She was a beautiful corpse called anguish, and it got Koremitsu more infuriated.
At this moment, the cellphone in the pocket vibrated.
It was from Asai.
He received the call, and brought the phone to his ear.
"It's me."
"Mr Akagi, we know who has been sending the slandering messages. Your little sister should be with her now."
Asai noted sternly.
"Who is it!!!?"
Koremitsu yelled agitatedly, but the name that entered his ears was one he never once thought of.
"Michiru Hanasato."
"Hanasato?"
A dumbfounded voice slipped from Koremitsu's lips.
"Yes. Your class representative."
Asai's voice was more monotonous than usual. Surely she wanted to inform Koremitsu as calmly as she could.
Thanks to that, Koremitsu was able to quickly recover.
"Koremitsu? What is the matter with Miss Hanasato? Is she—"
Hikaru's face was stiff as he asked.
The petite, plain looking Michiru Hanasato appeared in Koremitsu's cooled head.
Michiru, who had her hair tied in braids.
Michiru, who had her glasses removed, let her hair down to reveal little curls.

—good, good morning…Mr Akagi.

Both Michirus would widen their eyes, and their voices will shrill.
He then recalled Michiru saying that she wanted to be the number 1 class representative in Japan, showing that determined smile; his mind then got increasingly cooled.
She was unimpressive, but she had a faint aroma, an honest classmate who was deemed by Hikaru to be a Tachibana flower.
"Hono, Hono! she would often go around shouting this, looking so fidgety and hapless around Honoka.
Michiru's family too had a long, ingrained relationship with Hikaru's.
Since elementary school, she had been the class representative. She knew of the students information, and was able to obtain more information independently.
Asai's poised voice stated these facts to Koremitsu's ears.
Hikaru too remained silent midway through, his expression grim as he listened to the message that came from Koremitsu's phone.
Mikoto too watched Koremitsu silently with those refreshing eyes.
Fujino's expression too seemed to show worry for Koremitsu.
Once Asai's report was over, Koremitsu sank into silence, and echoing in his mind was his own dumbfounded voice.
(Hanasato…is the Poppy?)
◇
◇ ◇
The passionate, intense melody chimed just as Honoka picked up the phone, shocking her. It was the personalized ringtone for Koremitsu.
"Akagi?"
The reason why her tone was so stiff was because of the phone call she received the previous day. Since yesterday, her good friend, Michiru—
"Shikibu, you feeling okay there?
Koremitsu sounded really anxious. It appeared he was not worried about Honoka's condition, and wanted to ask something else, but he was stammering.
After fumbling over his words a few times, he asked gingerly,
"Erm…I want to ask about Hanasato…has she been acting weird recently?"
Normally, Honoka would have found this question to be very weird.
However, she quickly answered.
"Michiru's mom just called me, saying that she hasn't been home since yesterday!"
Koremitsu seemed to let out a groan.
"Any place where you think she might be?"
"I don't know. I did call Michiru, but I couldn't get through. Did something happen to her?"

Koremitsu definitely knew something. His grim voice and vague tone indicated that something bad was going on. With bated breath, Honoka quizzed nervously. After a long groand, Koremitsu hesitantly answered,
“I’m guessing…that Shiiko might be with Hanasato.”
“With Shiiko? Why?”
“…I’ll tell you later. Have a rest first. Listen. Don’t do anything crazy like yesterday. Just stay there.”
“—What?”
The phone hung up.
“What’s going on…”
Just when Honoka was about to call back, another call came.
“Miss Shikibu…? Erm, it’s about Mr Akagi…”
A fleeting voice rang in her ears.
Honoka agitatedly asked,
“Miss Kanai? Akagi just called me—he seems weird. Do you know anything?”
♢
♢ ♢
(…My butt feels cold.)
Shioriko’s consciousness was blurred, and that was the first thing she thought of.
She was seated on a hard, icy place.
(Yucks. I don’t like this place.)
She tried to touch the floor with her hands to confirm the texture, but found that her arms could not move.
(Eh? What?)
Her arms could not move freely, and neither could her legs, as no matter how she tried to stand up, her legs were tied together, unable to be free.
(No way, I got tied up…?)
Shioriko was fully awake.
She was seated inside a black metallic box. Through her eyes, Shioriko knew that it was a metal box as large as a cooler room, and it terrified her.
Luckily, the door was not sealed.
However, Shioriko’s arms were tied to the back, and her hands were sealed by something akin to duct tape. Furthermore, there was more duct tape attached to her ankles, and her body too was tied up in rope.
It was no wonder then that she could not move.
That was not the worst for her however. She could see a black skirt and legs in black kneesocks right outside the safe door.
That was the girls uniform of Koremitsu’s school.
“Ah, so you’re awake?”
That person leisurely spoke.
The owner of the voice bent down, looking at Shioriko, who was taken aback as a result.
The earnest round eyes.

The round face.
The swaying curls of the hair by the shoulder.
A genial smile on the lips.
However, she did not seem gentle in a slightest, and neither did she looked leisurely. Shioriko felt that the eyes staring at her were giving a vibe of squashing the innocence of a bug, and delighting in morbid emotions, thoroughly terrifying Shioriko.

(Michiru Hanasato!)

Yes. Shioriko was sprayed with something at the park, and she was rendered unconscious.
Shioriko notied that Michiru was sending a few suspicious messages titled as
'the Poppy', aiming to sow discord around Koremitsu.
Once she questioned what Michiru was aiming at, suddently—
At that moment, as she fell to the ground, Shioriko saw Michiru give an ominous smile, and the image of that appeared in her mind. It overlapped with the iamge of the current Michiru, now bending down to look at Shioriko, and the latter felt a chill down her spine.
It was a voluptuous smirk, a fiendish one!
Shioriko's first impression of Michiru when they first met at the park was that she was a clumsy, yet serious class representative.
However, the Michiru at this point was completely different from before.
It appeared that a woman much older, innocent and lethal, had possessed Michiru's body, smiling with her face, speaking with her voice.
"Where did you take me to? What are you planning?"
Shioriko had difficulty breathing, her throat ostensibly choked. That, coupled with the pressure on her chest caused her to nearly lose consciousness several times, yet she continued to glare back defiantly.
She did not know where this place was, and with her limbs tied up, she could not escape. All she could do was to wait for someone to save her, and buy some time.
Don't worry. Big brother Koremitsu will definitely come. It's fine. I don't have to worry.
I definitely won't be scared.
Michiru narrowed her crescent, alluring eyes, tenderly speaking with the tone
of one lecturing a child,
"When I was younger…I met a girl, a relative of mine called Akari…her father found a mistress and left home, so she ended up living together with her mother. She was 2 years younger than me, just like a little sister to me, a very cute girl."
What is she saying?
The tender voice seemed to caress Shioriko's skin, and the latter had

goosebumps rising on her.
The smirk on Michiru's face got increasingly tender, and bewitching.
"But when she was playing in the safe door, the door was accidentally locked. She could not get out, so she suffocated as a result."
Shioriko gasped. *Wait,*
"Akari's mother bawled really loudly at the funeral, but immediately got married with another man. It was said that man really hated Akari, so everyone was badmouthing the mother, saying that she sacrificed Akari for her own happiness. That however is the truth. The mother was smiling brightly when I met her a week later, and she did not seem to be grieving over Akari's death. Surely, she sacrificed to be one with her dearest, and attained happiness. Since you are cuter than Akari, Shiiko, God will surely be willing to fulfill my wish—"
Shioriko was shivering; she understood was Michiru was after.
"Stop it, Miss Hanasato."
She tried to retort back firmly, but the voice that came out was feeble,

"Miss Hanasato? Who's that?"
Michiru merciless taped Shioriko's mouth, showing a sneer.
That sneer was filled with malice, instantly freezing the struggling Shioriko.

"My name is Rokujō, and I shall become Fujino, his dearest."

Yes, that was what Michiru called herself before Shioriko passed out.
She called herself Rokujō.
While Shioriko widened her eyes, the heavy doors let out an icy sound, slowly closing.

Chapter 3

It was pitch dark outsie the window, and there was a downpour. The rain pelted upon the windows, ostensibly trying to smash them; the winds roared.
The winds were also howling on the night Hikaru died.
It was said that he was engulfed by the flooded river, and swept away by it.
The Heavens practically arranged the same stage as before.
(They still haven't found Hanasato and Shiiko?)
Koremitsu could only spend arduous moments waiting after Asai contacted him. Why Michiru? Is Shioriko okay? Such thoughts surged in his heart, and he felt a hand with sharp fingernails gripping his heart, not letting go.
Whenever the windows were rattled by the winds, Koremitsu got jumpy.
Mikoto was not around; she was probably out to contact the ones searching for Shioriko. The only ones in the room were Koremitsu and Fujino, and Hikaru the ghost.
Fujino was seated on the sofa, lowering her head sadly. The dim lights and the flames from the fireplace shone upon Fujino's clear white skin.

The light brown hair strands draped upon the shawl resting on her frail shoulders, and fell from it; despite this, she was so beauty it was breathtaking. She lowered her snowy nape, her long eyelashes casting a cast on the gloomy eyes.
Hikaru again lowered his head.
He too lowered his beautiful eyes beside Koremitsu, his lips curled into a knot, looking uttterly distraught, rooted at his place.

(What exactly is this guy thinking now…?)

Was he worried about Shioriko's safety? Or was he left utterly heartbroken seeeing his beloved woman being so despondent?
Assuming that it was Hikaru being his usual self, if there was a really depressed woman in front of him, he would embrace her even though knew he could not touch her, and say some sweet words in an attempt to console her.
But in Fujino's case, he was unable to look at her directly.
But even so, they do really appear to be a chip off the block, really identical.
They were blood-related aunt and nephew, and they were so similar in appearance, but that was not all. The reason why Hikaru had such an uncanny resemblance with Fujino was because their expressions and mood were so alike.
The movements of their eyebrows, hhow their lips squirmed, how they lowered their eyes.
And even the way they lifted their heads was so alike.
Was Hikaru like this when he was alive?
Hikaru once said in his anguish that he pursued Fujino numerous times when he was alive, and Fujino always rejected him…

—I had always loved her since I was young. Just seeing her causes my heart to feel warm and fuzzy. I feel like I am in Heaven whenever she smiled.

—I once thought that it will be fine if she and I are the only ones alive on this world. I love her so much that I cannot stop myself.

—But…she married someone else.

—I was in 6th grade when she became the second wife of my father. It was tormenting to be with her, so I left home during Middle School.

On that day when Hikaru confessed everything he had kept secret in his heart, he lowered his eyes despondently.
Back then, Koremitsu did not know that Fujino was a blood-related aunt to Hikaru.

But even so, he knew that Hikaru could not forget the person who became the wife of his father, was suffering as a resultt. This too caused Koremitsu's heart to be gripped.

—After we went our seperate ways, I fell deeper in love with her, and I… committed that one grievous sin.

The gravity of this confession weighed on Koremitsu's heart more than that instance before, causing the latter to eb suffocated.
Hikaru continued to talk about that one instance he shared with Fujino back then.
He never did mention what were the circumstances.
But it was just once, and ever since then, they never did it again.

—It was just once…really, just that once. After that, that person would keep shunning me, and the most she did in front of everyone was to greet me at bare minimum. She never did say any tender words that would give me hope.
It appeared that she wanted to forget about what happened back then—no, she wanted to pretend that it never happened.

What exactly were Fujino's feelings when she committed that one grievous sin with her nephew? Was it because she was unable to resist Hikaru's passionate advances? Or did Fujino too wish for it?
The sight of her eyes and head lowered slightly resembled that of a nun, and one could not imagine the exuberance and passion Hikaru once mentioned.
Fujino's thoughts were harder to comprehend as compared to Hikaru, and nobody could determine her true intentions. Did Fujino really not send a letter to Hikaru on the night he passed away?
Fujino was not rattled by Koremitsu's words.
However.
Koremitsu tried to recall Hikaru's narration of what happened that night. Having done so, he found Hikaru's words to be someone ambiguous as well.

—On the night I fell into the river—I was called out by her through a letter. She never wanted to make eye contact with him, but she suddenly wanted to meet me…I was really uneasy, I did not know what that person was thinking…but she wanted to meet me, and I had to go…

Hikaru said that his vision was blurred by the turbulent winds and rain, his body staggered, and he slipped into the flooding river.

—The moment when I fell into the river…someone grabbed my hand, trying to pull me up. I still remember the feeling of those hands that tried to grab

me.

—Someone? Not your stepmom?

—It was night, and it was raining furiously…I…could not see clearly. However, those hands certainly felt like a woman's so they are…

Those slender hands could not grab Hikaru's body, and Hikaru was finally swept by the river, ending his 16 years of life.

—…I fell into the river…this is without a doubt. That person was not responsible…but…if that person was the one who tried to grab my hands…I will cause her another layer of guilt…I already hurt her throughly because I so loved her…

—I am scared, Koremitsu. Scared—of that person's heart…what was that person thinking at that moment? What exactly was she thinking about me? How will she view me in the future—I am terrified, really, really terrified, so much that I cannot take this anymore…

Hikaru quivered.
Was Fujino the one who wrote the letter? Or was it someone else? If it was Fujino, was there a reason why she had to do it on a stormy night? Why did she have to hide such a thing?
The flames flickered in the fireplace, and the rain pelting on the windows got more intense. Only the sounds of the rain, winds and flames were left in the
house.
The blade of the knife placed by the window glittered a frosty light under the lamps.
Hikaru continued to keep his head lowered, the dangling hands clenched firmly. Fujino too had her eyes lowered, not moving at all.
The room was filled with such painful agony.
(Speaking of which…why does Fujino want to meet him?)
Fujino had been shunning Hikaru when the latter was alive. After he died, she claimed to not know anything about Hikaru at all.
But through Mikoto, she went through the effort to make contact with Hikaru's friend—Koremitsu. Surely something was amiss here? If she really did have Hikaru's child, she should be more willing to forget the sin she committed with Hikaru.
Koremitsu recalled the expectant eyes Fujino seemingly had when he arrived at the resort, followed by the words "I have been waiting for you for a while…Mr Akagi", which seemed to imply that she was expectant.
Suddenly, Fujino's sealed lips opened slightly.
"…Mr Akagi."

Koremitsu's heart jolted.
Hikaru's shoulders too shivered as he looked over at Fujino.
With her beautiful, melancholic eyes, she stared at him, her expression the same as whenever Hikaru mentioned his depressing past. She did try to restraint her emotions and talk calmly, but her eyes and lips showed a tranquil melancholy, a fleeting expression—
The feeble voice came from Fujino's pale lips,
"When…did you first become friends with Hikaru?"
Fujino's words were no different from a mother asking the friend of her son, an older sister asking the friend of her little brother, and this caused Koremitsu, so tense as he was, to feel surprised.
Hikaru's expression was slightly relaxed.
That beautiful woman who was said to be a Goddess in a legend was looking at Koremitsu with clear eyes, causing him to stiffen, and answer stiffly,
"…I entered High School with Hikaru. He borrowed a textbook from me a day before Golden Week started."
"Textbook?"
"Classics—he said he forgot it, but I didn't have Classics lessons that day, so I didn't have it."
Koremitsu recalled the story he told Tsuyako. Perhaps Fujino was just like Tsuyako, hoping to hear what happened to Hikaru when he was alive. Perhaps she just wanted to lament the death of the stepson she could not love when he was alive.
Tsuyako cheerfully noted 'Hikaru really did not do his homework' upon hearing that Koremitsu did not have the textbook, but Fujino looked depressed.
"Golden Week…this year?"
She whispered.
"Ah! I only got to talk with him on this, but we promised to be friends—that day feels like it was 10 years ago or something!"
Koremitsu frantically excused.
He was worried if Fujino would suspect if Hikaru would privately message somebody he only interacted with for one day.
But Fujino looked afar with anguished eyes, muttering with a forlorn, clear voice,
"I suppose…such things are possible to. Everything can be decided based on a certain moment…"
Tears of sadness welled in Fujino's eyes, and Koremitsu was left breathless by the beauty shown.
Was Hikaru's encounter with Fujino just like that? If Hikaru was 5, and Fujino married after graduating from college, that means she would be around 15…
Like Fujino, Hikaru too was looking afar.

—…Never…did I once view her as my aunt.

Koremitsu recalled Hikaru's bitter murmur, and his heart too was griped.
Could humans fall in love even when they were 5 years old?
Was it really love at first sight?
(I don't really know about it. I'll say that 5-year-olds are little brats with snot all over their faces…)
He thoroughly remembered yearning for the love of his always sobbing mother, so much that his heart ached.
Thus, he could understand the pain and suffering children go through in desiring others. Despite growing into adults, the intense feelings that lingered in the heart back then were special, unable to be forgotten.
Fujino again asked Koremitsu gently,
"It seems you have been calling yourself Hikaru's representative."
"I made a promise with him."
"Promise…"
The beautiful eyes faltered slightly.
It seemed her heart was gripped by the word 'promise'.
"He promised me not to let the flowers wilt. That guy will always give a serious look, saying 'Girls are flowers, so there is a need to take proper care of them'."
Melancholy gradually filled Fujino's eyes, but the eyes were clear as heartbroken.
"What kind of person…do you think Hikaru is?"
Why did Fujino appear to be suffering so much? Why was it that despite Hikaru not being on this world anymore, she never did show a sign of forgetting the pain…?
"Well, Hikaru looks lively, but he's quite a lonely guy. He appears frivolous, but is unexpectedly a serious guy."
For Koremitsu, Hikaru was such a complicated boy. He had many secrets, and was unwilling to reveal his true thoughts. No matter where he was, he would be with the ones thinking about him, devoting his all to them.
"Then, what kind of person do you think Hikaru is?"
Fujino again lowered her head.
Her eyelashes lowered, and there was silence. She looked lonely, but soon after, she muttered,

"Hikaru—is a tragic child."

Her tone was filled with anguish.
Hikaru, listening in on Fujino's words, too showed grave sadness in his eyes.
"Hikaru probably suffered through many unbearable things since his childhood…but he was always smiling."
Fujino's distressed voice, coupled with Hikaru's bereft expression, gripped Koremitsu's heart hard.

“Yeah. It looks like…he made a promise with his mother. That he has to smile even when he’s sad.”

—You have to smile no matter what happens. By doing that, everyone will love you

That was the talisman Hikaru’s ill mother left for her child before passing away early.
Even if others do bully you, give them an earnest smile.
Even though the one bullying him was ‘fate’ itself…
With tears welling in her eyes, Fujino muttered,
“If only he was able to cry…”
After hearing those words, for an instance, Hikaru looked utterly distraught.
However, in his attempt to dispel this emotion, he immediately raised his already sealed lips, softened his eyes, and showed a tender—beautiful smile.
That was the faint smile Hikaru would show when he was truly depressed.
Hikaru could not cry.
So he could only smile.
Upon seeing Hikaru being like this, Koremitsu too bit his lower lip.

—How does it feel to cry?

The admiring voice he once heard lingered sadly in his ears.
“!! Hikaru…”
Was there anything he could say for his friend, that friend who was much more sentimental than anyone else, yet could not cry?
Just when Koremitsu was about to speak up.
A commotion sudden occurred outside the door.
A furious female growl came from outside, and it seemed there was some kind of dispute. That was followed by footsteps headed towards this room.
Fujino raised her eyebrows slightly, and Hikaru nervously stared at the door.
At this moment, a tall woman dressed in black fur coat and a scarlet one-piece dress stormed in without knocking.
Fujino stood up.
“Miss Hiroka…!”
The one giving that anxious exclamation was Hikaru.
(If I remember, Hiroka’s—)
Upon recalling the identity of the guest causing this commotion, Koremitsu too was taken aback.
Kazuaki’s mother, the ex-wife of Hikaru’s father. Tōjō once scowled and exclaimed “I cannot let Aoi marry into that family with such a terrifying mother-in-law.” Hiroka Udate appeared with her eyebrows raised, glaring at Fujino so furiously that sparks could fly, hollering,

“Your husband is dying, and you are moonlighting with a high school boy? You are the death of me, you woman!”

Hiroka berated Fujino with a shrill voice, and Koremitsu stared at her, dumbfounded.
Was this the infamous mother of Kazuaki, Hiroka?”
Her eyeshadow and rouge was thick, and her face was pretty, but she did not to appear as her age. As Kazuaki’s mother, it appears she was more than 40
years old, but she appeared to be in her twenties. She was tall, had large breasts, a slender waist, and a nice figure comparable to that of a foreign actress. The make-up probably had something to do with it, but the shape of her grim looking face was distinct. The red hair had elegant curls at the end, and the hair was let down.
She really resembled her relative Tsuyako. In contrast to Tsuyako’s cheerful, alluring presence, Hiroka might have the alluring presence down, but the initial impression of her was that of being unapproachable.
If Tsuyako was the red weeping cherry blossom blooming elegantly, tenderly alluring others, Hiroka would be the thorny red rose.
(This aunt here came to complain about be getting together with Fujino. You got to be kidding me!?)
Koremitsu got up from the sofa, and Mikoto, who caught up to Hiroka, naturally slipped in, standing in a position where Koremitsu’s face was blocked, stating calmly,
“Miss Hiroka, Mr Akagi is a guest I brought over to visit Miss Fujino What you just said is not a fact at all; Miss Fujino is currently recuperating in this resort, and it is due to the Head’s kindness for she is about to give birth. Please do understand.”
“And you should have known about the Head being in critical condition last night, Miss Fujino.”
Hikaru widened his eyes in shock. Koremitsu too let down his clenched fists.
(Hikaru’s father is in critical condition!?)
Koremitsu did hear that Hikaru’s father was not in a good condition.
That was why he supported the factions lead by both his ex-wife, Hiroka, and the current wife, Fujino, to set up the position for his successor, for them to carry out a skirmish secretly.
In that battle, Hiroka’s only son, Kazuaki, did a gaffe that could not be overturned, and the Wisterias were deemed to be more likely to wind.
However, the reason why Hiroka suddenly barged in did not seem to be because she was peeved, nor out for revenge.
“Why are you not with him right now!? I am not that man’s wife now, you are, Miss Fujino! For him, you and I are just other women, not that Miss Kiriyo who gave birth to that dead brat! Now that he is dead, that man has nothing he loved left behind, and does not have any longing for this world

now. That man has, and will always love Miss Kiriyo! You can at least be her replacement!”
Hiroka’s holler were like blazing arrows, piercing through the atmosphere of anguish.
Koremitsu was stupefied.
Neither Fujino nor Hikaru spoke up as they listened to Hiroka’s words painfully. In contrast to the lively Hiroka, Fujino was akin to a corpse.
“You really are just like that hateful woman! Miss Fujino! When that man married you as his wife, I was really terrified, seeing how you resemble that woman so much, I thought that man used the Mikados’ research facilities to create a clone of Miss Kiriyo. For that man, you are just a replacement for her, but you already knew that when you accepted that man’s request to marry into the Mikados! Even so, you still became the Head’s wife, so you have to fulfill your duty until the very end! Just stay by his bedside and pretend to be Miss Kiriyo! If Miss Kiriyo is to tell him to remain alive, that man will come back even if he is in Hell! Or will he think that Miss Kiriyo has come to welcome him, and he will die? I suppose that is a good thing to you.”
Hiroka vented her feelings onto Fujino, not giving a room to breath. Fujino merely closed her eyes, and Koremitsu knew that action would further incense Hiroka.
“…I will not be going back.”
Fujino muttered.
Hiroka scowled deepened, her face contorted as she yelled,
“Why!? Because you have a reason not to meet him? Because the child in your belly is not that man, but that devil?”
Obviously, the ‘devil’ here referred to Hikaru.
Hikaru shrieked,
“That is not my child!”
Koremitsu too stood in front of Fujino,
“Hey! I’m Hikaru’s friend. She definitely has the kid of Hikaru’s dad here! Hikaru’s stepmom wasn’t willing to talk to him.”
Perhaps Hiroka saw the scathing messages, lost her cool, and started yelling without checking the details.
However, Hiroka gave Koremitsu the look of one looking down on a mongrel, saying,
“I received a message saying that the child in Miss Fujino is that devil’s. I thought it was baseless slander, but I had someone investigate just in case.”
She then turned her eyes towards Fujino.
“Miss Fujino, that child did meet you when you lived in this resort back in March, no?”
Fujino remained unmoved, merely standing there, her eyelids lowered, looking gloomy.
“I did visit her, but that was because I could not hold in my emotions. I was the one who came here, but she did not let me in at all.”

Hikaru frantically explained.
“Yeah, Hikaru did come to this resort, but he said that he was not let in at all!
The kid in the belly has nothing to do with Hikaru!”
Hiroka continued on, not giving Koremitsu a look,
“Yes, you did chase him away, Miss Fujino. However, you caught up to that child afterwards, and spent the night with him at the Church! That was when you were impregnated!”
(What!?)
Koremitsu felt a rock slammed at his head.
Hikaru too paled as he stood there.
Hikaru said that on the night Fujino rejected him, he met a woman at the Church too comfort his broken heart. He was reunited with the woman in that Church, Sora, embracing her tightly in the darkness, while the moon was shrouded by the clouds, until the morning.
“I…that night…I should be…with Sora…”
The quivering lips continued to stammer. Hikaru was probably recalling what happened back then.
Perhaps—
Though he kept thinking, he could not deny it. Doubt, fear, despair entwined
in Hikaru’s heart.
Koremitsu too could not refute.
There was no way such a thing could happen. Right, this should not be true.
Koremitsu felt the pain of his brain suffocated, his neck choked as he slowly looked towards Fujino’s belly.
It was covered by the shawl, so it was not obvious on first glance. Perhaps the life growing inside it however was Hikaru’s—
“…This is not Hikaru’s child.”
Fujino continued to keep her head low, muttering,
“Hikaru and I…never had such a relationship before.”
Fujino’s pale face looked utterly perturbed, her lips quivering. She said that she never did have a relationship with Hikaru, but that was a lie. Fujino did have that one instance with Hikaru when the latter was in 8th grade.
Thus, what Fujino denied was not a factual refute.
Perhaps it was a lie when she said that the child was not Hikaru’s!
Rage was blazing from Hiroka’s eyes. Her shoulders were huffed, her eyebrows raised, and her face was red due to rage. She took out a horizontal envelope from her bag, and tossed it to Fujino.
The envelop hit Fujino right in the face.
Mikoto was taken aback, and Hikaru too leaned forward. Fujino merely kept her eyes closed while the envelope hit her, and she then lowered her head. her white face was cut by the side of the envelope, causing it to bleed, yet she lowered her eyelids, remaining silent.

“We shall know the truth once the child is born and the investigations are done. if you continue to insist that the child is his, go ahead. If you dare say that your child is that of your blood-related nephew, I will never forgive you!
I will never allow him to be born, even if you do, I will choke! I already regretted not doing that when Miss Kiriyo gave birth to that devil.”
The red hair danced in the air as Hiroka stormed out of the room.
Mikoto bowed as she watched Hiroka leave.
And with the footsteps departing, Mikoto approached Fujino, picking up the envelope that dropped by her feet, before reaching her hand onto Fujino’s back—
“Please allow me to treat your wounds.”
She brought Fujino out.
During that time, Fujino continued to look down, her eyelashes lowered, her lips sealed, and her eyes remained hollowed as she lowered her head.

Koremitsu and Hikaru were the only ones left in the room.

The storm that was overpowered by Hiroka’s words started to buzz again, declaring their presence, and the damp windows were rattling due to the winds.
There was a fire in the fireplace, but it appeared the room was much colder than before.
Hikaru collapsed to the floor.
“Hey—”
Surely it felt strange to say to a ghost ‘hang in there’, but Hikaru was utterly pale, his skin looking as though it would vanish at any given moment. His limbs and lips were quivering.
“How…did I not realize it…”
Hikaru’s feeble stutter was so despondent, so feeble, it was horrifying.
“That night…when Sora embraced me…it was so warm…so comfortable… during then…I fell asleep…and then…I woke up in darkness…Sora was looking down at me…and I reached out to her, calling her ‘Sora’…I pulled her close, and she embraced me…and then…we remained…until the morning…when I woke up, Sora vanished…I had…a white shawl on me… that shawl…was of fine quality…something really expensive…the usually thrifty Sora cannot possibly have such a thing…”
Hikaru kept his head lowered, the soft hair strands draped upon his face, covering his pained expression.
However, he never did try to disguise the pain and despair in his voice.
“That night…the one who comforted me…was Sora. But the one, who bonded with me…was not Sora…”
He had a secret encounter with his dearest. Normally, it was something worth being happy about, or something of a blessing.
However, if the life that was not desired resided in her.

That it was the child of the blood-related aunt and nephew—
“That person…has…my child…in her? Can such a child…be born?”
Hikaru’s misery caused Koremitsu to feel gloomy as well.
It was unlike the moment when Sora confessed to be pregnant.
If the father of Fujino’s child was really Hikaru, it would be out of wedlock, a child born out of incest.
Fujino and the child would continue to bear that crucifix for the rest of their lives.
Hikaru, who was told by many ‘if only you were not born’, would leave behind a child that should not be born.
Fujino should know it was a sin.
(Why did she send Hikaru back after he came all the way to the resort, and yet gave chase after him? Why did she pretend to be Sora and embrace Hikaru?)
They could not do such a thing.
For that would bring about misfortune.
She knew that, so why did she!
Hikaru lifted his head, and grabbed Koremitsu, his hands and arms entering Koremitsu’s body. Even so, he continued to look at Koremitsu, his face completely contorted as he yelled,
“What do I do no, Koremitsu! That person intends to give birth to that child! She will do it no matter who objects! What do I do now! I am already dead —”
Koremitsu too realized the gravity of the situation, and remained silent.
His body, with Hikaru’s hands reaching inside, was shivering.
The fact Asai was worried about became reality.
(What do we do now!? If the kid’s going to be born, that kid’s a lost cause just like Fujino!)
Would Hikaru go insane?
Would he continue to linger and wander around the world?
Would Fujino live the rest of her life, unable to smile or yell, just like a living corpse?
Such a notion caused Koremitsu to feel his chest being ripped apart.
Suddenly, the cellphone in his pocket vibrated.
Koremitsu fished out the phone with one hand, and checked the message.
Another anonymous message!
He opened the message, and attached to it was a photo of Shioriko tied up with duct tape and rope, collapsed somewhere.

“To Hikaru,
Come to the place where you betrayed me, at the same time as that night.”

That was the line in the message.
The message was signed off with the name ‘Fujino’.

While Hikaru remained in utter despair at this point, Koremitsu gritted his teeth as he glared at those words—and the photos of Shioriko tied up.
(You too, Hanasato. What's wrong with you! What are you thinking!?)
◇
◇ ◇
The moment she firmly believed Lord Hikaru was in Koremitsu Akagi's heart was when Koremitsu compared her to the Tachibana flowers.

—Hanasato!

He called out Michiru's name, and with a serious look.

—You're like the Tachibana flowers. You're plain, but you have a gentle memorable fragrance. I think that's very good.

It was almost the same words as what Hikaru said during their elementary school days, that he liked the Tachibana flowers. Those words throbbed Michiru's heart.
But something was amiss.
Koremitsu was definitely a gruff, crude person, and it seemed he would not know of any flower names at all.

—Hono, does Mr Akagi like flowers?

—Eh!? How's that possible? He probably has an interest in eating flowers. Ah, but…

—But

—H-he does know of a species called the Heliotrope…it's not a common flower name…he said that a friend taught him that.

As far as Michiru could see, Koremitsu Akagi had no friends at all. It was said that was the same before he entered the Heian Academy High school branch, that the people around him kept shunning him.
It seemed Koremitsu told Aoi and Asai that he was Hikaru Mikado's friend.
There was no chance for Hikaru and Koremitsu to interact. The only day where they could meet was right before Golden Week, the day Koremitsu attended school.
She was surprised to see Koremtisu attend Hikaru's funeral, but back then, Koremitsu was scowling away, looking peeved, and did not seem to be mourning the death of a good friend.
So when did he become Hikaru's friend?

Aoi, who had been ignoring Koremitsu at first, ended up greeting Koremitsu cheerfully whenever they met. Koremitsu too was making visits to Yū Kanai, whom Hikaru visited at her apartment numerous times. Shioriko, whom Hikaru reached out to, was adopted by Koremitsu's family. Tsuyako, who was the prettiest flower amongst Hikaru's garden, started to trust Koremitsu.
having observed these, Michiru was thinking "Maybe—"
And then, once Koremitsu said those words to Michiru, she understood.
Hikaru's body was haunting Koremitsu. He was living inside Koremitsu, with a will of its own.
That had to be the reason why Koremitsu knew of things only Hikaru did, and how she would occasionally see them as one entity.
Hikaru is not dead
He is still alive!
This firm saved the other Michiru inside her heart, that battered soul would kept stating all her grudges to the one she loved.
That Michiru too loved Hikaru. No, it was a deeper love than that.
On that spring, when she was 14, she arrived at the resort in Shinshu, and heard that Hikaru too was at a nearby resort, in a retreat with his family. She came to the Mikados residence, thinking 'Can I meet him? Just a peek will do.' She nervously wandered around, and Hikaru appeared.
Michiru was very delighted, and from that day onwards, at the resort, she would tail Hikaru.
On a certain day, she saw that beautiful, dreadful sight.
The beautiful, violet flowers hanging off the wild Wisterias.
Hikaru was standing under them.
His white skin and faint brown hair sparkled under the dazzling light, the violet Wisterias seemingly raining upon him like a waterfall as he reached his slender arms towards them.
And then, he dotingly embraced those fallen petals.
They were like cicada skins, scattered all over the floor, none of them in his grasp.
But even so, Hikaru reached out to embrace those flowers, his sidelong face looked anguished.
After Hikaru left, it was a beautiful woman who had the exact same face as Hikaru, stealthily appearing while seemingly evading others, squatting on the piled Wisterias. She touched the violet petals Hikaru touched with her white hands, giving an endearing, tragic kiss.
A pearl-like tear slid down her white cheek.
Soon after, she sat in the middle of the Wisterias, curled up, ostentiously sinking in the abyss of the Wisterias.
The violet flowers made no sounds as they gathered about her slender arms, breasts, throat and legs.
A secret love—
Michiru's heart race, and her cheeks, ears and head were searing.

She practically forgot how to blink, and everything was kept in her heart like a special present.
Those two so loved each other.
But even after shying away from the public eye, they could neither meet, let alone talk.
Even so, Michiru understood.
That Wisteria was the dearest to Hikaru—
Michiru was aware that she was just an unimpressive, boring girl, unable to remain in Hikaru's eyes
If I'm to maintain a pure heart, one day, Lord Hikaru will find me. Just as he said I am like the Tachibana flowers he like.
That was what the Michiru on the surface wished.
The other Michiru however felt that it was merely a daydream, and had long given up on it.
Because of that, she admired the forbidden relationship between Fujino and Hikaru.
The only one who was a match for the beautiful Hikaru was the similarly beautiful Fujino.
But they could never fall in love in this world.
Such a tragedy.
Such a sweetness.
She saw how they yearned each other, and wanted to touch their world—no matter how little it was. That was why she stalked Hikaru and Fujino, and kept following them.
Whenever the Mikados had a party for those relevant, she would surely attend and observe them.
Hikaru and Fujino would never converse with each other in front of others, but when nobody else was looking—
She saw Hikaru pick up the champagne glass Fujino used, miserably kissing it; she saw Fujino stroke the chair Hikaru sat on, lower her head, and show a teary sight in her beautiful eyes.
She saw Hikaru give a forlorn stare at the painting Fujino saw, and saw Fujino pick up the rose Hikaru approached and had a whiff of, hurt by the thorns on the rose, covering her fingertips with such guilt, lowering her head
—
Whenever Michiru saw such sights, she became increasingly expectant.
And then, she ended up hoping that she would one day become like Fujino, able to have the forbidden love with Hikaru.
Michiru knew that it was an unhealthy thinking, and so she found herself to be shameful for thinking that way, burying such thoughts deep within her heart.
But the other Michiru became 'Fujino', inciting the forbidden thoughts she had for Hikaru.
The reason why Hikaru could never converse with Michiru in front of

everyone, wander through the flowers, create scandals with girls was that they were secretly in love.
His true love was Fujino.
Ironically, this thinking saved the Michiru on the surface. Hikaru kept ignoring Michiru because he was trying to hide his secret romance with Fujino.
Due to that, the sadness and despair of being omitted by Hikaru vanished, and even the sweet loving words Hikaru said to other girls became sweet pain to her.
The Michiru on the surface, and the one on the other side co-existed as such, wandering around each other.
Michiru knew that the other Michiru was just her imagination.
When exactly did it begin?
The woman called ‘Rokujō’ would begin to sweet talk by her ears.

—Hey, remember me?

When she was little, she met a red-clothed woman in front of the shrine at the Udates.
She could no longer remember the face and profile of that woman; all that remained in her heart was that red one-piece dress and the red flowers swaying in front of the shrine.
It was a terrifying, noble woman with power—
The embodiment of the spider

—I have been growing inside your heart. Pluck the flower, and let me out.

—With that, I will grant you the power of the spider. Get the lover in your hands, crush him, and let him be yours forever.

The venomous red flowers were swaying.
And so, **Michiru** plucked it.
Thus, the Michiru on the other side was able to hear ‘Rokujō’s’ voice, and use its power.

—To get the one you love to love you back, just devour the thing that person loves and replace yourself with it. Sometimes, you will have to devour the one you love..

—You are to devour the Fujino if you wish to become the real Fujino..

Michiru Hanasato was gradually disappearing.
But even so, it did not matter to her. Michiru was never needed by anyone.
Nobody would call her by her name; even her own family hardly did so.

Michiru's mother was very strict, and would slap Michiru's palm whenever the latter did something wrong, always compare her to her outstanding older sister, lamenting "Why is it that your older sister can do it, and you cannot?"
Her mother was also spiteful that her father bore a little brother with another woman, and she kept nagging at Michiru, "Even though he's a boy, a child born out of wedlock is still a child born out of wedlock. You two are the legitimate children of your father, so you have to be smarter and more elegant than that mistress' boy." But despite hiring a few tutors, Michiru never displayed any outstanding talents, and remained an unimpressive, dull-witted girl. It seemed her mother was vexed by it, for one day, she sighed, saying,
"That is enough." and stopped scolding Michiru.
She had no hopes for Michiru!
Even Honoka too, the only one who called Michiru by her name, felt pity for the dull-witted Michiru, who was in Heian Academy since kindergarten. She was with Michiru, only wanting the latter to be her foil.
So whenever Honoka called her Michiru, the latter's heart would ache, and she felt suffocated.
Michiru too was displeased to see Honoka being interested in Koremitsu, Honoka blushing and flustered because of him.
When Koremitsu fulfilled the promise Michiru had with Hikaru, she thought she would no longer be any inferior to Honoka.
But she was wrong.
The feelings she had for Honoka, whether it was anxiety, restlessness or hatred remained etched in her body, and never vanished.

Why? I shoud be satisfied?

I should be happy!

I should be blissful!

At that moment, Rokujō again muttered.

*—No. Michiru may be satisfied, but **Fujino** is yet to be. The promise **Fujino** made with Hikaru has yet to be fulfilled. You will continue to remain so pathetic until the promise is made, a human inferior to Honoka Shikibu, always being pitied.*

"I shall…never allow anyone to look down on **me** again."
Michiru muttered to herself, her black eyes giving off a cold glint as she stared at the black metal safe.
Some kicking could be heard from the inside of the door, only for them to completely vanish.

The storm continued outside the window.
It was just like that night, the night when Hikaru betrayed, the night when Fujino betrayed.
Let it begin all over again.
And then, fall in that pure love with that most dazzling boy in the world, completing that process neither Honoka Shikibu nor anyone else could obtain.
Michiru switched off the light, only holding a torchlight, and opened the cabin door.
The winds were strong enough to rip the door down.
Michiru's face was dampened by the rain, her soft hair strands swaying in the wind. She was about to be knocked over by the winds, and she took a step into the dark storm while wearing her school uniform.
"I will go on to fulfill that promise…**Hikaru**."
◇
◇ ◇
It was near midnight when Asai and the rest learned of a high school girl resembling Michiru Hanasato bringing an elementary schoolgirl onto a taxi, and they asked the driver for Michiru's destination.
Leaving aside Michiru, the driver had quite an impression the bright-eyed pretty girl. It seemed Michiru told the driver, "We'll be headed to our relatives' home later, but my little sister is too tired that she's sleeping."
Asai sent a message notifying Koremitsu that they were off to save Shioriko, and with Tōjō and Aoi, they got on a car to give pursuit.
(Michiru Hanasato is not sane at the moment. We have to stop her before it is too late.)
And if Shioriko was to have nary a scratch on her, Asai would be too ashamed to meet Koremitsu.
The torrential downpour meant that it was difficult for the car to move forward. Right when she was feeling frustrated, a call reached her.
Hiina notified Asai that Michiru went to a mega electronics shop to purchase a vault, and the destination was a cabin of Michiru's relative in Shinshu. That
relative was overseas, rarely in Japan. This matched the destination the taxi mentioned, and it appeared Michiru was hiding there.
Rather than feel relaxed however, the fact that Michiru bought a safe unnerved Asai.
Once she heard that the safe was large enough to stuff an elementary school girl inside, Asai felt a chill running up the spine.
Tōjō and Aoi heard the call inside the car, and they probably thought of that incident too. Their faces froze.
This incident was revealed.
But to Asai and the rest, it was a tragic incident of an elementary schoolgirl close to them accidently locked inside a safe.

The victim was of a similar age, so for quite a while, Aoi would tug at Asai's arm firmly whenever they passed by the safe at home.
That girl was a relative of the Hanasatos—Michiru's family. In that case, Michiru probably had a deeper impression of it.
"Is…Miss Hanasato actually going to put Shiiko—"

Aoi shivered, and Tōjō grabbed her shoulders, trying to encourage her.
Asai's tone too bleakened,
"We have to hurry."
◇
◇ ◇
(I feel suffocated.)
Shioriko realized that the more she struggled, the lesser the air inside, and so she curled herself in an unnatural position, silently waiting.
However, the air was thinning. She could not hold on for much longer.
(Save me, big brother Koremitsu!)
◇
◇ ◇
(Were you walking down the riverside in such a large rain?)
The winds did somewhat calm down, but the rain continued to pour, stabbing at the land. His feet were muddy, and the umbrella was of no use at all.
Koremitsu went off to the riverside where Hikaru died, along with Mikoto and Fujino.
Both Mikoto and Fujino were wearing hooded raincoats, and large, bead-like raindrops fell from them. Fujino kept her hood as low as possible as she lowered her head and moved forward. Her eyes could not be seen, but the face and lips being lit by the torchlight was pale.
Before she went out, Fujino stared at the knife placed by the windowside miserably, and kept it in her clothes.
Koremitsu saw Hikaru shiver as the latter saw this, his face contorted, seemingly fearing something.

—You're going to bring the knife out? It's dangerous. Don't do that.

In response to those words,

—This is…a talisman.

A lifeless Fujino answered.
Her voice was flat, and an ominous feeling grew in Koremitsu's heart.
Mikoto merely watched Fujino with those refreshing eyes, and did not stop her from bringing the knife out. Neither did she stop Fujino, who was about to give birth, from going out in this stormy night—
As they approached the river, the waters whipped harder and harder. The river was practically throwing a tantrum.
(Going out now is already dangerous. Coming to the riverbank is suicidal.)
What sort of feelings did Hikaru have when he arrived at the river?
And if Fujino did call Hikaru out, what sort of feelings did she have?
Once he knew that Fujino might be bearing Hikaru's child, Koremitsu was left wondering about her thought process.

What was she thinking when she took action.
Why did she shun from Hikaru, and yet did something that could have caused Hikaru's child to be born?
Fujino lowered her head, covering her face.
Hikaru too appeared to be in great distress. Both of them looked as though they were about to be executed.
(Damn it! I can't see the road in front! What's Hanasato planning to do in this weather?)
The message that was sent along with Shioriko's photo stated that the promise with Hikaru was to be completed.
After reading the content, one would know that it was not directed at Koremitsu, but at 'Hikaru'.
But Hikaru was already dead.
(Or is Hanasato able to see Hikaru?)
But even so, Hikaru did say at the resort that if the sender was 'Fujino', that the promise between 'Hikaru' and 'Fujino' could be fulfilled, then there was no way it could be fulfilled.
Hikaru was in such despair when he said this, and had no strength to sigh. His expression and voice were utterly languid—only filled with misery.

—Because, there was only one promise I made with that person when I was younger, for us to be together before.

This happened a long, long time ago, and can no longer be fulfilled. Now that I am dead, it is absolutely impossible.
It was true that unless Hikaru revived, such a promise was impossible.
No, there was still a way.
However, that was too frivolous, and Koremitsu decided not to think about it.
(Anyway, let's find Hanasato first and talk it out.)
Suddenly, he found a swaying light amidst the grass patch opposite the river, akin to ghost lights.
Koremitsu shone his flashlight, and the raindrops falling diagonally were revealed in the orange light. He saw Michiru wearing the school uniform, her hair ruffled by the wind as she stood there.
Michiru did not hold an umbrella, and was thoroughly soaked by the roak.
One had to wonder if it was because of the hair sticking onto her face, or because of the little smirk on her lips—
Michiru was giving off an alluring presence, one drastically different from before.
Right, just like Kazuaki was wearing the wig and female clothing—
And with an intonation similar to Kazuaki's, she said,
"You are rather punctual there, Hikaru~~~~"
Chapter 4
(Michiru, why aren't you picking up the phone?)

Honoka was in the taxi racing towards the Mikados' resort, calling Michiru over and over again. She sent a few messages, but never got any replies. She placed the phone by her ear, her gut almost ripped apart. Seated beside her was an uneasy looking Yū
Koremitsu called regarding Michiru in the evening, and then, Yū anxiously called.
That was when Honoka learned of Shioriko being abducted.
That was the reason why Koremitsu stammered, asking if there was anything strange with Michiru.
Honoka gasped a few times as she heard Yū's words.
Koremitsu was saying that Michiru was with Shioriko. In that case, did it mean that Michiru abducted Shioriko?
She could not believe that the ever serious Michiru would ever do such a thing!
Koremitsu told Honoka to wait quietly, but the latter just could not do so. She decided to give chase after Koremitsu, and Yū too requested the same.
Honoka found it strange that she was working together with her love rival Yū. However, she was a lot more relieved that she was not going alone.
Honoka heard from Yū that Koremitsu went off to the Mikados' resort, so she gave a call to Tsuyako, but could not get through. Thus, she could only give calls to the students at school asking for the address.
They took the train to the location, and then got on the taxi they had arranged for beforehand.
The car was bumping about on this road that was not practically not paved at all. The windshield was dampened by the rain, and the front was completely dark.
Suddenly, she saw an orange light in the darkness.

(Michiru!)

Only a section of the riverbank was lit, and Michiru stood there, wearing her school uniform, showing a faint smile. On a closer look, Koremitsu too was holding a torchlight, standing in front of Michiru. The ruffled red hair was soaked by the rain, sticking onto his face.
Koremitsu shone the torchlight at Michiru, glaring at her. Two women in raincoats were standing behind him, seemingly leaning upon him.
Honoka then exclaimed to the driver,
"Please stop the car!"
◇
◇ ◇
"Where's Shiiko?"
Koremitsu scowled as he glared at Michiru, inquiring,
If it was the usual Michiru, she probably would be flustered and answering shrilly once Koremitsu glared at her. At this point however, she gave Koremitsu a bewitching smile,

“Watching home~”
She answered.
The only things shining on each other was merely the torchlight both parties have. In the glaring light was Michiru, soaked all over in her blazer, pleated skirt and kneesocks, grinning away.
Before he came to this place, Koremitsu did receive the message from Asai, notifying him that they found Shioriko’s whereabouts.
Shioriko probably would be saved by Asai and the others, unless Michiru had an accomplice. In any case, Koremitsu could not forgive her for involving the elementary school girl Shioriko.
And so, his voice got sterner as he asked,
“Why did you kidnap her?”
“Did I not say it already? To revive Lord Hikaru, of course.”
Hikaru, standing beside Koremitsu with a grim face, was pained so much, his face was writhing. The rain was slightly abated, permeating through his slender body, and the tender hair strands swayed silently in the rain. Such a scene was really fleeting, empty, and Koremitsu again realized that Hikaru was a ghost.
“That’s impossible.”
“How is it impossible? Is Lord Hikaru still not on this world? Living inside your body, Mr Akagi. It is useless to try and bluff me. I do know. Lord Hikaru can hear this, right?”
Michiru spoke with a sickeningly, sweet voice, shocking Koremitsu.
Hikaru too widened his eyes.
(She’s able to see Hikaru, for real? She just called me ‘Hikaru’, right? No, that’s impossible. If she can’t see, she’ll probably ignore me and talk to Hikaru himself.)
It was likely that Koremitsu, who was supposed to pass on Hikaru’s words, caused Michiru to think that Hikaru had possessed him. In fact, Hikaru could not leave Koremitsu, so in a certain sense, she was right.
But if Koremitsu was to admit to this, the situation will get complicated. Surely Fujino and Mikoto, watching from behind, would be completely confused.
And so, Koremitsu spoke seriously,
“So what do you want? Calling the dead back? Didn’t you already bid farewell to Hikaru?”
The smile instantly vanished from Michiru’s face.
She lowered her head, her eyes showing a gloomy shadow.
“Yeah, Michiru said it. But I have not.”
That sight of her unnerved Koremitsu.
“If you aren’t Hanasato, who are you?”
He asked, and she slowly raised her face.
The damp skin showed an alluring gloss, and the lips curled into a confident smile, the pale flames flickering in the eyes.
“Rokujō. ”

Hikaru gasped.
Koremitsu’s heart immediately shrilled.

(Rokujō—!)
The embodiment of the spider that was worshipped in the garden of the Udates, having devoured the husband and his mistress.
Michiru blurted from her lips the woman's name that horrified Tsuyako, whom Kazuaki worshipped, with a malicious smirk on her face, and that caused Koremitsu to be dumbfounded.
At that moment, a familiar yell was mixed in the rain,

"Michiru!!"

The one running towards Michiru in jacket and thigh pants in the cold rain, tumbling in the mud and nearly falling over was Honoka, who should be recuperating at home
And Koremitsu immediately told off Honoka, whose pants were covered in mud, running towards them,
"Shikibu! How many times must I tell you to stay at home and wait! Ack, even Yū's here!"
Koremitsu saw Yū's long hair as she walked silently behind Honoka, soaked in the rain. He widened his eyes. Yū's long skirt too was soaked, sticking to her legs.
"…Sorry. I-I was worried about you, Mr Akagi…"
"Yeah, how can I just sit by and wait!? Michiru's my friend!"
Honoka insisted, shaking her damp hair aside.
Suddenly, a sarcastic voice could be heard.

"Friend? Is Michiru Hanasato not simply a foil to Hono?"

Michiru gave Honoka an icy glare, and Honoka's face immediately froze.
"Michiru, what are you saying?"
"Michiru Hanasato is so stupid, so plain, a poor lackey everyone calls 'rep'. That's why you pretended to help her, to indulge in that superiority of yours, right? Just pretending to protect Michiru, and everyone will think Hono is one with a strong streak of righteous, a good person who cares for her friends, right? 'Why's it that Honoka's is with that useless girl of a class rep'
'probably because Honoka's enthusiastic about helping others, and couldn't leave her behind, I guess. She's feisty, but she's kind at heart'—You know that everyone else in class is saying that, don't you? You know, right~~~?"
Honoka was speechless. However, she immediately clenched her fists, yelling,
"If I did, I would have sent them kicking! I didn't become friends with you for such reasons, Michiru—"
"Ah, shut up already! I don't want to hear your pretentious kindness! You're an eyesore, Hono!"
Michiru shouted like a child making a tantrum, and again shot an icy glare,

“If only you had died in the fire.”
She muttered with a sweet voice.
Both Honoka and a scowling Koremitsu, listening in on their conversation, were dumbfounded.
“I set the fire, and you got saved.”
Fear appeared in Honoka’s eyes, and she asked Michiru.
“That was…caused by you, Michiru?”
One could hear from Honoka’s trepidating voice that she did not wish to believe. However, Michiru naively answered,
“I am not Michiru. I am Rokujō. Mr Kazuaki wished to frame Yū Kanai in the name of the Poppy, so I decided to use the chance for this. I felt that if I could inform you of this, Hono, you will definitely interfere.”
“So you telling me that Shikibu taking photos of Yū was deliberate!?”
While Koremitsu glared, Michiru answered,
“Yes. I suppose Hono will be devastated to learn that the one she loves is doubting her. I said I love you to torture Hono. The bracelet you picked up at the stairs was placed by me too. That was not the bracelet Hono dropped from the veranda, it was a similar one Michiru has. Michiru is scared of wearing the same thing as the ‘cool Hono’ would wear, that she will be compared with Hono again, looked down upon. That is why she never wore it.”
Koremitsu recalled the silver bracelet.
The bracelet was placed at the steps Hiina fell from. He thought that definitely was Honoka’s, was rattled as a result, and questioned Honoka.
Yes. Michiru did say that she too bought a bracelet similar to Honoka. That was actually left there by Michiru!
The smirk on Michiru’s face intensified.
“The reason why Hono lost the bracelet was because I knocked her.”
Honoka’s face was contorted, and she was utterly confused as she yelled,
“You’re lying! Michiru isn’t that sort of person!”
“She is that kind of person. It is simply that everyone thought of Michiru as a fool, and never did notice it. That was why they got careless, telling her everything, including their secrets. Even if I am to do something harmful, I just have to play dumb so that nobody else would have noticed it, right? The fire alarm that triggered on the day before the culture festival was one such instance. I did say that I actually touched it, and you believed it, no, Mr Akagi? That was deliberate too.”
“Wha—”
Koremitsu let out a suffocated voice. Michiru glanced aside at him, looking intoxicated, saying,
“I want to make you isolated, Mr Akagi. Just like how Lord Hikaru was isolated because of his issues with the girls when Michiru was in elementary school. Back then, I was really delighted to have Lord Hikaru rely on me for the first time. I even stole his recorder and art box. Once I found those

things back for him, and bought new ones for him, Lord Hikaru would thank me."
This time, it was Hikaru giving the same reaction Koremitsu did.
When Hikaru was in the elementary school, he declared an oath of love to 5 different girls in the back garden, a ripe place for confessions. After that happened, Hikaru was neglected for a few days, and at that moment, a kind girl sent letters of folded white flowers to him.
Hikaru called her Miss White Flower, and back then, he talked about that temporary moment of exchanging letters with that girl with that tender smile.
He said, "Someone was willing to encourage me, and retrieve my stolen recorder and art box"."
The culprit harassing him was actually that White Flower herself.
Michiru was not ashamed in the slightest, even raising her eyebrows regrettably,
"I really wished you did rely on me back then, Mr Akagi, that you will end up liking me more than you like Hono. You actually solved everything yourself however, and I am disappointed. In that case, I could only pretend to support Hono and obstruct her."
Honoka's mouth was half-opened, but it seemed she could not say anything as she curled her lips painfully again.
Koremitsu too finally managed to eke out a voice,
"…So the one who placed the umbrella and the blade in Yū's room…was you?"
"Yes. I did tell the big sister at the hospital counter. That big sister wanted to be Mr Kazuaki's lover. To her, Miss Kanai is a huge eyesore—so she was very willing to help me in bullying Miss Kanai."
"So the one who sent those messages to Saiga and Aoi in the Poppy's name, and taunted them, was you!?"
Koremitsu was so infuriated his head was about to explode.
"It was me."
His ears were hot, before they finally cooled off quickly. On the day of the culture festival, Koremitsu acted as Michiru's boyfriend for one day, and accompanied her around school. Back then, she was so delighted that her cheeks were red. They fed each other takoyaki and cotton candy, and at the back garden in the elementary school, Michiru were the Cosmos ring Koremitsu made for her, smiling weeping as she said
"Thank you".
The difference between that Michiru and this smirking Michiru was way too different, and caused a migraine in Koremitsu's head.
"Didn't…you give that nice smile at the culture festival when you bid Hikaru farewell? Was that an act?"
Michiru's face suddenly turned serious.

“No. She really was delighted. Michiru was delighted that you took Lord Hikaru’s place to be her boyfriend in the culture festival and made her as Cinderella, Mr Akagi. Later, when she met Hono, the frustration within her never disappeared.”
Honoka’s shoulders shivered.
“When she was wondering “Huh, something is weird”, **Rokujō**. She said fulfilling Michiru Hanasato’s promise is not going to cut it. She said that there is still a promise yet to be fulfilled. The promise between **Fujino and Hikaru**—”
Michiru’s eyes again flicked a bewitching glint.
The rain pelted upon her cheeks and forehead, the droplets dripping from her chin and eyebrows.
Fujino probably was standing together with Mikoto behind Koremitsu, yet she did not say a single word.
Why was it that Michiru’s frustrations with Honoka was related to the promise between Fujino and Hikaru? Koremitsu was left flabbergasted.
Hikaru too remained silent.
“Why did Rokujō suddenly talk to you?”
“Well, it was not sudden at all. It started from a long, long time ago; Rokujō was already in my heart back then. When I was younger, I attended a party at the Udates, and met a woman dressed in red at the shrine. She was the one who told me the way to obtain the one I love. She said that I just need to devour the ones in the way.”
Michiru’s words shocked Koremitsu. Hikaru too looked dumbfounded.
Did Michiru see the shrine in the Udates?
One had to wonder whether her meeting with Rokujō was just a delusion when she was young, or something actually happened that caused her to think this way.
But the existence of Rokujō was ingrained in Michiru’s heart back then, showing on her from time to time, seeding calamity.
It started when she was very young—in elementary school, in fact.
Now that Hikaru died, Rokujō still remains alive!
Koremitsu was thoroughly soaked by the rain, and by the time he realized it, he found his mouth to be dry.
“So the chain messages titled as ‘Women around Lord Hikaru’…were sent by you, right?”
Michiru slowly raised her lips.
The white face shown by the torchlight was innocent, yet at the same time, showcasing the alluring charm of a matured woman.
“That is because Hikaru does not need any flower other than his dearest~~~~his garden only needs that prettiest flower.”
She was smiling, but the icy hatred, malice, bitterness and frustration spread in her eyes. Those were the dark emotions targeted at Hikaru’s beloved.

Hikaru was staring at Michiru. He was shivering in fear, yet he could not look away from her—
“What Hikaru really wants is that purple Wisteria. Nobody knows. They thought they were loved by Lord Hikaru, and got gleeful as a result. I have to let them know no matter what. All of you are replacements. Her Highness Aoi was wreaking havoc at the funeral, and I had a feeling she would self-destruct, so I started from Miss Kanai, whom Hikaru visited every night.”
Yū, standing silently beside Koremitsu, shivered slightly, her petite face looking terrified.
Michiru’s hair was sticking to her face.
She never did sweep it aside, and hissed with a vengeful voice,
“**Michiru Hanasato** will only wait for Hikaru to take an interest in her, but **I**
am different. I want to uproot all the flowers other than the Wisteria dearest Hikaru, and I shall be that wisteria. The Wisteria standing there is the one that sinned.”
The one that sinned?
Hikaru was about to shout.
But Michiru was faster, the frosty light in her eyes flickering with intense emotions as she gently raised her hand, clearly pointing at the one behind Koremitsu.

“That Wisteria **killed Hikaru**.”
Chapter 5
“I saw it~. You tried to stab Hikaru with that knife.”
The calmed winds suddenly bellowed around Michiru, and every word of rebuke she said echoed in the icy darkness.
Koremitsu could not look back. His face was frozen. He said the spite appearing in Michiru’s words, the rain falling upon her icy boy.
Hikaru’s face was contorted, his lips slightly opened.
“No…”
It seemed he said that, but the word was overpowered by the sounds of the winds, the rain, and Michiru’s voice.
Michiru’s malicious words were like the poison falling onto the water surface, spreading upon it, corroding even Koremitsu’s heart. He could not move; the poison had practically spread all over his body.
“That night, I knew that Hikaru was living in the resort, so I ran out of our resort, and had a peek at the window to Hikaru’s room. I saw Hikaru slip out in the middle of the night. It seemed he was waiting for someone at the river, and then, when you appeared, he called out “Miss Fujino.”. back then, you whispered,”
Michiru muttered,
“Why did you decide on that?” —”
Hikaru’s face got increasingly contorted. He winced bitterly, and his eyes silted.

Koremitsu had an impression on those words from Fujino Michiru talked about.
That was back when Yū was shut in her room, unwilling to head out. Back then, Hikaru did nothing, merely watching on from the sidelines lifelessly, and he explained to a rowdy Koremitsu,

—In the past, someone important… once chided me… why I made such a decision. At that time, I felt that my decision might not be the correct one…

Back then, Hikaru gave a fleeting, forlorn smile to Koremitsu, who was unable to accept this answer.
(So those were what Fujino said!?)
In that case, what Michiru was narrated about actually happened? The one who called out Hikaru was Fujino, and that night, Fujino appeared to Hikaru
—

“And then, you held the knife with both hands, running right at Hikaru.”

Koremitsu felt a hard smack at his head.
Was that the knife that was placed by the window, that was too dangerous to be an ornament?
Hikaru was obviously rattled when he saw that knife.
Before she left, Fujino stared at that knife in melancholy, and kept it in her clutches. At that moment too, Hikaru’s shoulders shivered, his face contorted.
The uneasiness felt back then was engulfing Koremitsu completely at this point.
He turned his stiff neck, and once he finally turned his head around, he saw Fujino lower her head, her eyelids slightly downed. The raindrops fell from her raincoat hood, dampening her hair. The hems of her skirt was drenched along with her feet.
But even so, Fujino was breathtakingly beautiful.
She never did refute a single word Michiru said; the eyes welling tears were looking down, her thin fleeting eyebrows eyebrows lowered, her petal-like sealed together, as she merely remained silent with anguish and pain.
Just like when she was chided by Hiroka.
A lifeless, beautiful corpse—
(Why aren’t you saying anything!? Please! Say something! Refute it!)
Koremitsu kept screaming in his heart.
Both Honoka and Yū looked over at Fujino, uneasiness and shock appearing on their faces.
In stark contrast to Fujino, for every word Michiru said, Hikaru’s face would contort, his shoulders and lips quivering. The reason why he was so flustered was definitely because what Michiru said was the truth.

That night, Hikaru saw Fujino charge at him with a knife!

—The rain was heavy, and I could not see anything in front.

Hikaru thoroughly insisted that he died in an accident. The feeling Koremitsu had back then, that Hikaru was hiding something about his own death, was not merely a feeling.
Suddenly, Mikoto, standing beside Fujino all this while, entered Koremitsu's eyes.
With a grim face, she accompanied her master, whose head was lowered. However, she did not show the stupefied faces Honoka and Yū showed. Perhaps she too knew that Fujino called for Hikaru, and pointed the knife at him.
As the storm intensified again, Michiru glared at Fujino with fiery eyes, venting all her hatred on the latter.

"You murdered Hikaru!"

Fujino continued to keep her head lowered, not moving at all.
The beautiful eyes were merely showing tears due to gloom and misery. Just as the flowers would never speak, Fujino too did not say anything.
At this moment, Hikaru yelled in anguish,
"No! I slipped into the river! I never got stabbed by Miss Fujino!"
Koremitsu too yelled agitatedly,
"Hikaru didn't have any stab marks on him, right!? Fujino never did stab him, and Hikaru wasn't killed by her! Isn't that right? You didn't stab him, right?"
He kept calling for Fujino desperately, and the latter merely folded her eyebrows, not answering at all.
Michiru then refuted sharply,
"Hikaru tried to dodge that woman's attacks, and slipped into the river as a result. You can say that that woman killed him."
"Miss Fujino grabbed my hand!"
"You did grab Hikaru's hand when he fell into the river, right? You wanted to save Hikaru, didn't you?"
Please, tell me that's the truth!
Tell me that you never intended to kill Hikaru! Even though the fact remained
that you pointed the knife at Hikaru, you regained yourself and grabbed his hands, trying to save him, didn't you!?
That you tried to save Hikaru right when he's shivering and pale, wanting to trust you!
Koremitsu begged, his fists clenched so firmly that blood was about to seep from his hands.

Honoka and Yū probably had the same feelings as Koremitsu. Both of them were giving pleading looks to Fujino.
Mikoto was the only one who was mentally prepared, and it appeared she was going to accept Fujino's words wholeheartedly.
Fujino opened her sealed lips.
She lowered her head, and stated calmly,
"No, I did not grab him."
At that instant, the rain weakened.
Fujino's voice clearly echoed into everyone's ears.
Hikaru looked utterly devastated, while Honoka and Yū gasped too, frowning, contorting their faces miserably.
Koremitsu too widened his eyes, looking utterly stupefied.
Mikoto in turn kept her stoic face.
Michiru gleefully curled her lips.
"Yes~~that woman was just standing there with a knife. The one who grabbed Hikaru, **was me!** "
Hikaru's eyes faltered, his pale face looking utterly stunned.
For Hikaru did not know of this either.
For Hikaru thought that Fujino was the one who grabbed him.
On that night, there should only be Fujino and Hikaru.
"That woman wanted to kill Hikaru, and I tried to save him. That is why—I am more suited to be his dearest~~~!! I am the real Wisteria!"
Michiru never gave anyone a chance to pause as she spewed out those words like rapid fire arrows, her rain soaked face appearing to be in ecstasy, standing there like an omnipotent god.
"Hikaru's fated loved is me! Hikaru's dearest is me! This is why I will set this straight! I shall save Hikaru, become his Wisteria, we shall be the best couple, living in our pure garden alone, always loving each other~~~"
The maniacal delight. The delight of victory.
For Michiru, the rain pelting upon her might be sweet dew of blessings.
Koremitsu felt a chill down his back, and gulped his bitter saliva.
Michiru had lost all sight of the boundary between reality and delusion.
How was she supposed to revive Hikaru, cremated into ash and buried in a grave, and start all over again?
That was impossible.
(Damn it! How am I supposed to chase that Rokujō out of Hanasato's heart!?)
Honoka too was staring at Michiru with fear and anxiety, as her friend continued to inch closer towards being a monster beyond common sense.
The rain embalmed Michiru—Rokujō, and she appeared to be surrounded in light, the torchlight glowering her..
The rapid lashing of the flooding river echoed in Koremitsu's ears.
Suddenly, Fujino asked,

"You wish to save Mr Hikaru?"

Michiru being in such ecstasy at this point, suddenly shivered.
Fujino gently lifted her head and eyes, staring at Michiru silently with those eyes of agony and overwhelming beauty, asking again,

“When you did reach out for Mr Hikaru’s hand, what did he do?”

For some reason, Michiru could not answer.
She widened her eyes, her expression frozen, and her face got contorted. Her mouth, half-opened, seemed to be gasping for air, and her eyes showed something akin to fear.
Upon hearing Fujino’s question, Hikaru too remained frozen.

“Did he grab it? Or did he let go?”

The monotonous voice was filled with some misery.
Michiru still did not answer.
She held onto the torchlight firmly, and looked away from Fujino, biting her lips; it seemed she was trying her best not to shiver.
Why did Fujino keep asking this question? Why did Michiru show such a frantic expression? Koremitsu did not understand.
However, the tide had turned. Fujino, filled with anguish in her eyes, calmly asked the questions, dominating Michiru.
Hikaru’s pale, handsome face too showed a serene agony, seemingly having given up.
“…”
And even the rain echoed sadly and weakly as Fujino’s voice; all that replaced it was the lashing of the river echoing clearly in the ears.
Mikoto, who was so loyal to Fujino, watched her beautiful master with an unflinching stare.
While Koremitsu and the others watched on with bated breath—Fujino then said to Michiru, the latter biting her lower lip, seemingly wanting to affirm.

“He let go, did he not?”

Hikaru’s face was faint as he stared at Michiru, agony clearly filling his eyes.
Michiru widened her eyes slightly, before shivering. She covered her ear with her empty hand, shaking her head slightly, seemingly having heard something ominous. She kept on shaking her head, over and over again. One might feel that she was pleading for Fujino not to continue, and not that she was denying it.
Fujino then lowered her eyebrows, the serene despair appearing on her face along with misery.
“I suppose…Mr Hikaru really wanted to die after all.”

“!”
Michiru shivered again, and she shrank back.
Koremitsu and the others gasped.
Hikaru, whose face was exactly the same as Fujino, showed the same sorrow, the same despair—the same agony as he stood in the tranquil rain.
Mikoto merely stared at Fujino.
And Fujino too was embraced by the rain, just like Hikaru, showing the same look of agonizing despair at Michiru, seemingly admitting her guilt as she muttered feebly,
“Both Mr Hikaru and I were suffering. We wanted to make this end. Our hearts could never be at ease.”
Michiru shrank back, seemingly shielding her body as she muttered weakly, “No…”
She timidly lifted her head, but the moment she saw those clear, beautiful eyes that were clouded in despair and misery, all the words she could mustered vanished in her mouth.
Fujino’s pain and despair was so deep.
“The message you sent me stated that you wish to start all over…to be the one fated partner of his in this world…but you have nowhere to escape. That means you had no other options. The meaning of the other half is an existence that cannot be cut away—that you cannot leave him at all. That fated partner you talk of is merely a curse you cannot escape from, even after escaping to the ends of the world.”
Fujino’s tone was gentle.
She did not glare at Michiru.
But her calm tone and anguished eyes clearly conveyed a pain, darkness, and despair she experienced till this point.
“That i-is not…”
Michiru’s face was contorted as she tried to counter, but her words melted lifelessly before she could say anything.
Surely, no matter how much she was berated, no matter how much she was called a murdered, the agony and despair Fujino possessed would never falter.
Upon thinking of how deep the darkness within Fujino was, Koremitsu felt a chill raising in his body, his heart wincing so much he was about to be overwhelmed.
The beautiful Fujino, who was so alike to Hikaru, continued calmly,
“If you had experienced that despair and suffering caused by that partner, whom you cannot leave at any given moment…you can never call it ‘love is sweet’. When you wake up in the morning, you will think of that person. When you are awake, that person’s voice will continue to echo in your ears. Even when you are dreaming, he is smiling at you. You never have a chance to rest, let alone breathe—that can be considered a curse.”
Fujino once appeared at Shioriko’s garden, kissing the Comfrey alone, in anguish.

The tears fell down her white cheek, and the sight of her eyelids lowered was painful.
Just seeing that image alone was enough to suffocate anyone.
That ‘dearest’ meant that all five senses—and the soul would be dominated, a love to be devoted to even in the past, or in the present.
That was a curse.
Fujino, whom Koremitsu saw back then, was like a beautiful prisoner.
Michiru glared at Fujino.
Koremitsu again recalled those words of love Michiru sent to his cellphone,
I knew, right from the beginning, that this is a love that can never be allowed, a grave sin that breaks the taboo, one where nobody will bless me.

I knew very well that I was practically gouging myself, incinerating myself…
just a bitter love that will bring about pain and despair, an arduous love.

It can never be revealed to anyone, and we shall continue to love in the darkness, where the moonlight cannot shine upon us. Did we not entwine our fingers and promise?
That it was an eternal promise.

I love you.
I always did.

I loved you more than my own happiness, my own future,
Even though it is a sin, I still love you, so much that it is maddening.

My beloved Hikaru, your ‘dearest’ will always be me.

Michiru talked about that arduous love, but in fact, she never did understand that suffering in the slightest.
She said that it was a grave sin never to be committed, but she did not understand the weight of it.
She merely admired in the highly forbidden love.
Indulged in the sweetness of the secret love.

When the times change, will you remember me? Remember how our hearts are connected in that time, the blissful, bewitching and pure moments?

Will you remember our hands intertwined with each other, our legs folded together, the sweet despair that came with the frigid pain?

The eloquent prose that were ornamented with sadness immediately faded in the face of real despair.
What Michiru viewed as a treasure, the unparalleled love, gradually collapsed with every word Fujino said—in her eyes.

What she was saying was basically, The love in your delusions is never pretty, never sweet in reality.
The love Michiru talked about was unrealistic. She was just admiring it.
“Having met Mr Hikaru, I was cursed. It was my sin to fall in love with him, and my pain and suffering continued whenever he lived. I assumed that I could relax after he died, but it never did. Right now, all i feel is just a hollow emptiness and despair. This too will continue to happen in the future.”
The dark abyss continued to spread in Hikaru’s eyes.
That was the same abyss Hikaru would occasionally show when he first got to meet Koremitsu.
The dark despair.
A love of only pain.
However, she wanted to repeat it again. She wanted it to end, but she could not end it. The determination and despair continued. Do not look at him, stay away from him. It felt like his whispers could never be heard—she kept thinking of the same thing over and over again, telling herself the same things over and over again, that this love was a mistake, this love was a sin, this love would bring destruction.
But even so, she could not sever the love.
“You are not me, so you do not understand.”
Fujino, who became the wife of Hikaru’s father, decided to flee from Hikaru, who became her stepson, and committed that one grave sin.
Ever since then, she refused Hikaru over and over again.
Yet she pretended to be Sora, and again bonded with Hikaru; perhaps the child flowing in her body had Hikaru’s blood.
She had to forget him, she had to flee from him, she had to have him far away from him.
But her soul and body were all attracted by Hikaru, and never was she able to forget him, even for a moment. This caused her to again commit the sin she should not have.
The rising emotion of despair in Fujino accompanied the tide, and Koremitsu understood those inexplicable acts of hers were all born of her love to Hikaru.
“Never once did I call Mr Hikaru by his name affectionately, and never did I once think that Hikaru belongs to me. My feelings for Hikaru were never sweet to me, and I do not feel that my feelings for Hikaru are pretty. I was never able to obtain happiness from it.”
Fujino’s words too etched into Koremitsu’s heart.
It seemed Hikaru could no longer yell nor beg for mercy, and he too was showing the same look of despair Fujino showed, standing there. This left Koremitsu breathless.
(Are you the same too, Hikaru?)
Were you pursuing Fujino on your part, loving her, and yet hoping to forget her?

“It does not matter whether we are blood-related or not. The reason why I am
so alike to Mr Hikaru is because we are thinking of each other too much, and this will only cause us pain. If reincarnation is possible, I—”
Fujino’s voice paused.
She swallowed the emotions rising in her heart, lowered her eyelids, and concluded with a feeble, yet clear voice,
“…I wish to live in a world without Hikaru.”
Those words stabbed right into Koremitsu’s heart.
Honoka and Yū too were pained so much, they winced.
Michiru widened her eyes like a person lost in a storm, looking completely perplexed.
As the rain continued on, pausing at intervals, Fujino continued on by the side of the lashing riverbank,
“Hikaru too will surely say the same things to me. Never once did we think that this love will ever be reciprocated, that both of us will be happy; we both knew that this will only continue in pain. If he wanted to continue living despite that…he would have held your hand. Since he let go, it means Hikaru wanted it to end, to end the days filled with only despair.”
Koremitsu noticed that Hikaru, who was staring at Michiru, was staring at Fujino with an anguished, bleak face.
He stood still, appearing to vanish at any given moment

—Hikaru probably killed himself.

Koremitsu recalled the words Tsuyako muttered to him, and those words continued to echo in his ears, unnerving him.
There was no sign of cut marks on Hikaru’s wrists when he became a ghost, but Tsuyako said that something was amiss with him when she rode on the horse with him at the turf.
She said that Hikaru looked feeble.
She was worried, and so she could not help but kiss Hikaru.
(So you chose to die, Hikaru?)

—You want to know the reason why your stepmom called you to the riverside, right?

—….

Koremitsu asked, and Hikaru bit his lips, remaining silent.
It appeared that he was afraid of knowing the truth.
But in fact, that was not the case.
(You already knew of Fujino’s feelings, didn’t you?)
He knew that Fujino rejected him, and yet at the same time, loved him.

Hikaru, who was able to tell on a single glance who had fallen in love, could not possibly have omitted the passionate thoughts in Fujino's heart.
Yes, Hikaru knew.
He knew why Fujino called him out.
He knew why Fujino pointed the knife at him.

—I slipped into the river…that is correct. It is not that person's responsibility.

—I know that I love that person so much, that I hurt her so thoroughly…I was the one who caused that person to be so unhappy…

No matter how he tried to refuse, he was lured by that person. Even after looking away, averting his eyes, he could only feel that other party's existence.
He could never forget the other party, from the moment he was awake in the morning, to the moment he slept at night. Even in his dreams, do the thoughts pursue him.
The only way left in which he could end this cursed, despairing love, was to end his own life—

—I am scared, Koremitsu. I am scared—of that person's heart…what was she thinking of at that moment? What was she thinking about me? How will she think about me later on—I am scared, really, really scared, so terrified it is unbearable…

The reason why Hikaru was terrified was not because he did not understand Fujino's thoughts.
It was the opposite! It was because Hikaru understood Fujino so well, that their hearts could empathize with each other that he feared the love he could never escape nor sever.
And then, at the dim riverbank, with the storm bellowing, Fujino held the knife with much determination in her anguished face, and charged at Hikaru.
Hikaru tried to dodge, but fell into the river; Michiru reached her hand out to him, trying to pull him up, yet he rejected her by letting go, and was swept
away with the current.
(Is this the truth of that night?)
Koremitsu felt hammered in his head over and over again, and he gritted his teeth.
Tsuyako once stated adamantly that no matter how much pain she was in, she would never swap her fate for anyone else, and would continue to fall in love with Hikaru.

But the most beloved, Fujino, the dearest to Mikado, who was deeper in love with him than anyone else, was showing despair on her face at this point, concluding that she wanted to live in a world without Hikaru.
What would Hikaru be feeling after hearing those words?
Hikaru's face was calm and fleeting as he stared at Fujino.
It felt that he would have vanished at at this instance.
Did he show such an expression when Tsuyako met him at the turf?
The soft strands of golden hair swayed forlornly, and the weakening rain was absorbed by Hikaru's body as he appeared to merge within them.
(Hikaru, why must you look like you can give up on everything?"
The petal-like lips too showed a faint smile,

"Even if he is still alive, Mr Hikaru will never find happiness."

Fujino noted sadly.
She gave Michiru a pained look, and with a languid expression, having given up on everything, she said,

"Mr Hikaru should never have been born."

—This child should never be born.

Those were the words the adults around Hikaru said to him since he was young, and now, the woman dearest to him actually said it!
Koremitsu saw a smile appear slowly on his face, and was left in agony.
"…"
Mikoto too lowered her eyes.
Honoka began to mutter something,
"How cruel…"
It appeared that was what she said.
Yū, who knew that Hikaru had a special someone he loved, appeared to be on the verge of breaking down in tears.
Michiru in turn appeared to have completely crumbled.
She tried to start over from where the mistake happened, but was declared that everything was a mistake. No matter how much she admired it, hoped for it, they were all crushed; she was told that the dazzling love she so yearned was just pitch darkness, and this caused her legs to quiver as she bent down, widen her eyes, and stammer softly,
"No…this is not how it is…our love…is beautiful…the purest love in this world…the prettiest of them all…why…must you lie…because that Wisteria…is a fake…yes…this is not it…**Lord HikaruLord Hikaru** would not reject this love…that he would not reject me…"
All the personalities inside Michiru were completely rattled, and she was stupefied.
"…Got to save Lord Hikaru."

Michiru staggered towards the river.
“With that…Lord Hikaru will again thank me…he will find me from those noisy, wretched women, and choose me…and love me alone…”
“Michiru, that is—!”
Honoka frantically exclaimed.
“Hanasato, stop!”
However, it appeared Michiru neither heard Koremitsu nor Honoka’s voices as she stumbled to the river.
The uneasiness arose in Koremitsu’s heart.
Michiru, imprisoned by the madness that was Rokujō, said that she wanted to revive Hikaru to fulfill the promise between Fujino and Hikaru.
But that was impossible. In that case, the only method would mean ‘Fujino’ giving chase after Hikaru, and choosing death—
“Koremitsu! Stop Miss Hanasato now!”
Hikaru probably realized what Michiru was up to as well as he frantically called out.
Koremitsu dashed towards Michiru.
“Michiru, wait!”
“Don’t come here!”
Koremitsu lashed out at Honoka as he reached his hand out towards Michiru.
“Listen…Lord Hikaru is calling for help.”
“Hikaru isn’t over there!!”
His nose touched Michiru by the arm, and he ended up grabbing at the damp air. Tripped by the mud, Koremitsu tumbled, and hastily stepped firmly onto
the ground.
Then, he saw Michiru fall slowly into the river.
That happened in an instance.
With a smile, Michiru fell forward, and the sight of her falling into the river was etched in Koremitsu’s eyes. Honoka shrieked, and Hikaru too shouted, “Miss Hanasato!” as the black water splashed.
The growling currents immediately engulfed Michiru’s petite body, and only the slender arm swept gradually by the river appeared in the eyes.
“Damn it!”
Koremitsu tossed the torchlight aside, and jumped into the river after Michiru.
“Akagi!”
◇
◇ ◇
The river water so so chilly, it could have frozen Koremitsu’s body, and he nearly fell unconscious countless times.
Following that was a ripping pain that pressed upon his body.

The black currents raced on, and it appeared 10 times faster than the flowing pool he went to with Honoka and the other sin the summer, as he could not move his limbs freely at all.
“Koremitsu! Koremitsu!”
Hikaru kept calling for Koremitsu.
At this moment, Koremitsu spotted what appeared to be Michiru within his range.
He moved his body, now swept by the current, over to that body. No, it would be precise to say ‘swept towards it’.
“!”
It seemed Michiru had passed out, and she would be swept further down the river. The river water entered his mouth, eyes and ears, and he was almost crushed by the water pressure.
“How—can I give up now?”
He reached out his arm that was practically ripped off, and this time, he grabbed Michiru’s body.
“Ugh!”
And so, Koremitsu pulled Michiru up, hugging her firmly.
Michiru was completely limp not moving at all. I won’t let go! I’ll definitely get her up to the surface together with me!
“Koremitsu! Behind you!”
Hikaru’s voice caused Koremitsu to turn back.
A large tree fell before the duo as they flowed forth. The water lashed upon it, causing large splashes, and flowed to the other end of the tree.
Koremitsu narrowed his eyes, and firmly embraces Michiru with his arms.
“Watch out, Koremitsu!”
Hikaru exclaimed the moment Hikaru’s back hit the trunk.
He felt a sharp from his back, and it felt as though his heart was crushed from behind, causing him to wince in pain. However, Koremitsu did so deliberately.
With Michiru in his arms, he moved along the trunk. The currents continued to surge, and he was unable to get onto the riverbank successfully. He was already at his limit trying to protect Michiru and get to land.
“Hey! Hanasato! Wake up! Hanasato! Hanasato!!”
Koremitsu kept yelling her name by her ears.
“Open your eyes! Hanasato!”
Michiru groaned, and opened her eyes.
Once she saw Koremitsu, she was taken aback, and started to struggle.
“Argh! Why? Let go of me! No!”
‘You idiot! If I let you go, you’ll be swept away!”
“It’s fine…! I want to go over to where Lord Hikaru is. I shall be the Wisteria over there!”
“You’re still saying such nonsense now!? Pull yourself together!”

Koremitsu embraced Michiru firmly, protecting her from the branches, rocks, glass fragments, and cans that came with the river, and lashed out at her.
“I don’t know where you’re going, but Hikaru’s definitely not there! You said it yourself! Hikaru’s in me! In that case, just think of what I say as what Hikaru said!”
Koremitsu was so furious, he caused Michiru to shiver, speechless. From up close, he glared at Michiru,
“You’re not Fujino, and you’re not Rokujō! You’re Michiru Hanasato! Why is it that after being Michiru Hanasato for more than 10 years, you’re pretending to be another woman!?”
Michiru’s face winced. It was the same perplexed, helpless, childish look she gave when Fujino said, ‘you are not me’, and she bawled,
“Be-because, nobody wants Michiru! Nobody will call the name Michiru Hanasato! I don’t need…such a name.”
Everyone just calls me rep…
Koremitsu recalled Michiru saying those forlorn words, and was immediately left speechless. Michiru’s contorted face got increasingly tragic,
“Lord Hikaru too. When he let go of my hand, he said ‘that is enough’! He said the same thing mom did…’that is enough’—’that is enough’! Nobody wants Michiru!”
An anguished cry was eked from deep within the throat, cutting at Koremitsu’s heart.
Though he was unable to understand what Rokujō was thinking, ‘Michiru’ felt pain and desire. For Koremitsu, who was shunned by everyone else since he was young, never had a friend who called his name, who had his own
mother abandon him, he really could empathize with her.”
‘That is enough’—Michiru, who was rejected by the one she desired, recalled the words from her mother that were similar, and Koremitsu could feel the despair.
How depressing, how tragic it is to realize that one was not needed by anyone. Those too came with the regrets and heartbreak, “If only I was not born with this look”, “If only I didn’t have such a personality”, denying oneself.
But if he was to tell Michiru that he too felt the same, he would only be told ‘then leave me alone’.
Right, he would never admit to feeling the same as Michiru!
He would never agree to Michiru’s excuse!
With Hikaru’s stern eyes watching them, Koremitsu again lashed out,
“There are people who need you, right!? Just listen? Somebody has been calling for your name for a while!”
A voice came from beyond the rivers’ lashing.
That probably was not an auditory hallucination on Koremitsu’s part,

“—ru!”

Michiru too pricked her ears.
And then, she widened her eyes. She too probably heard it.

“Michiru—!”

A flash could be seen by the riverside.
Honoka, holding the torchlight, was crouched on the ground. Surely, she came running here desperately. Her damp hair was sticking onto her face, her clothes were completely wet, and her cleavage and thighs were mostly covered in mud, most probably because she fell over. Her face and forehead too were littered with mud, her reddened eyes filled with tears as she kept calling for her friend’s name. She was worried!
Michiru’s eyes and lips—quivered,
“Hono…”
“Why do you think Shikibu stayed with you? Do you think she really looks down on you? Stop making your presumptuous decisions. Get up shore, and ask the girl herself!”
Koremitsu let go of Michiru, now lowering her head timidly, and supported her body from behind, telling her, “Grab the tree! Just go on like this!”
Michiru then began to slowly move on.
Honoka, raising a torchlight by the riverside, was watching them with bated breath.
Hey, you’re leaning too far forward. What do I do if you fall in too, Shikibu?
Koremitsu too scowled as he moved forward little by little. The splinters on the truck cut his hand, and pain could be felt.
Honoka reached her hand towards Michiru, who had reached land.
Michiru grabbed firmly onto the tree, and lifted her head to see Honoka and the latter’s hand. Her face was stiff; she was still hesitating, apprehensive, still afraid.
Honoka gritted her teeth and leaned forward, touching Michiru’s hand.
Michiru shivered in shock.
This time, it was the muddy Honoka grabbing the hand that Hikaru let go of that day, pulling Michiru onto shore.
Having seen that, Hikaru narrowed his eyes, appearing to have seen something marvellous. Koremitsu too,
(Yeah, Hanasato. Don’t let go of those hands. Don’t give up. Hold it firmly.)
Right when Koremitsu’s body relaxed.
A strong gust of wind came from the front.
“Woah!”
Koremitsu fell backwards, his upper body facing the sky.
“Akagi!”
“Koremitsu!”

The river water surged on; Koremitsu felt his head hitting something hard, and sank into the river before he could sense pain.

Chapter 6

(Damn it, I got careless.)

Koremitsu drifted in the water, thinking glumly.

(I just relaxed carelessly after seeing Shikibu pull Hanasato up.)

He actually let his guard down at the end. At this point, Honoka must be panicking.

(That girl is so feisty and short-tempered, but she's unexpectedly a crybaby.) Koremitsu could not help but imagine Honoka charging towards him angrily, her face all teary, and his heart ached. He wished she too did not jump into the river and try to look for Koremitsu.

It was terrifying, and it was rather plausible.

Also, if he was to be discovered as a floating corpse, Koharu would surely give him a good scolding.

—Why are you always causing trouble! It's a miracle that you're able to get into a prestigious, refined private high school! And you end up absent from the opening ceremony because you're hospitalized! You say that you were knocked down by a truck at the red light? You think you're an elementary school kid or something?

Ahh, that was the moment when Koremitsu was hospitalized and bandaged like a mummy.

Because of that, Koremitsu's plan to actually make friends once he entered high school, and spend his life like an ordinary student, was drastically altered. He was completely devastated, but he was feeling frustrated to hear
his uncompromising aunt nag at his ear.

—Shut up already! Just put my change of clothes down and go back!

Once he said this to Koharu, his ear was nearly ripped off.

—That Koharu. She's abusing me now that I can't move. Damn it, damn it!!

Once Koharu returned, Koremitsu grumbled away, and then, he saw the flowers sticking into the vase by the windowside.

They were refreshing white flowers blooming from the stem, a soft little feather growing on the bud, akin to a newborn's hair.

Isn't it inauspicious to have white flowers in a hospital?

Koremitsu wondered as he stared at the white, fluttery petals. he felt the anxiety and frustration in his heart silently dissipating.

It was useless of him to be so frenetic.

This is fate. Friends too are the same; when the ripe is ripe, maybe I will have friends.
Koremitsu managed to force himself to think positive.
After that, he kept staring at the flower whose name he did not know of.
On the day before Golden Week, he went to school on crutches.
After that, he passed through the central corridor, meeting a handsome boy standing by a pillar.
The morning sun shone upon his soft hair, and he dazzled with light. The boy's lips, eyes and nose, everything was the completely opposite to Koremitsu, so soft, so tender.
Is this a dude? Or a lady? Right when Koremitsu was wondering, with a rich, sweet voice.

—Mr Akagi.

The boy called out to him,

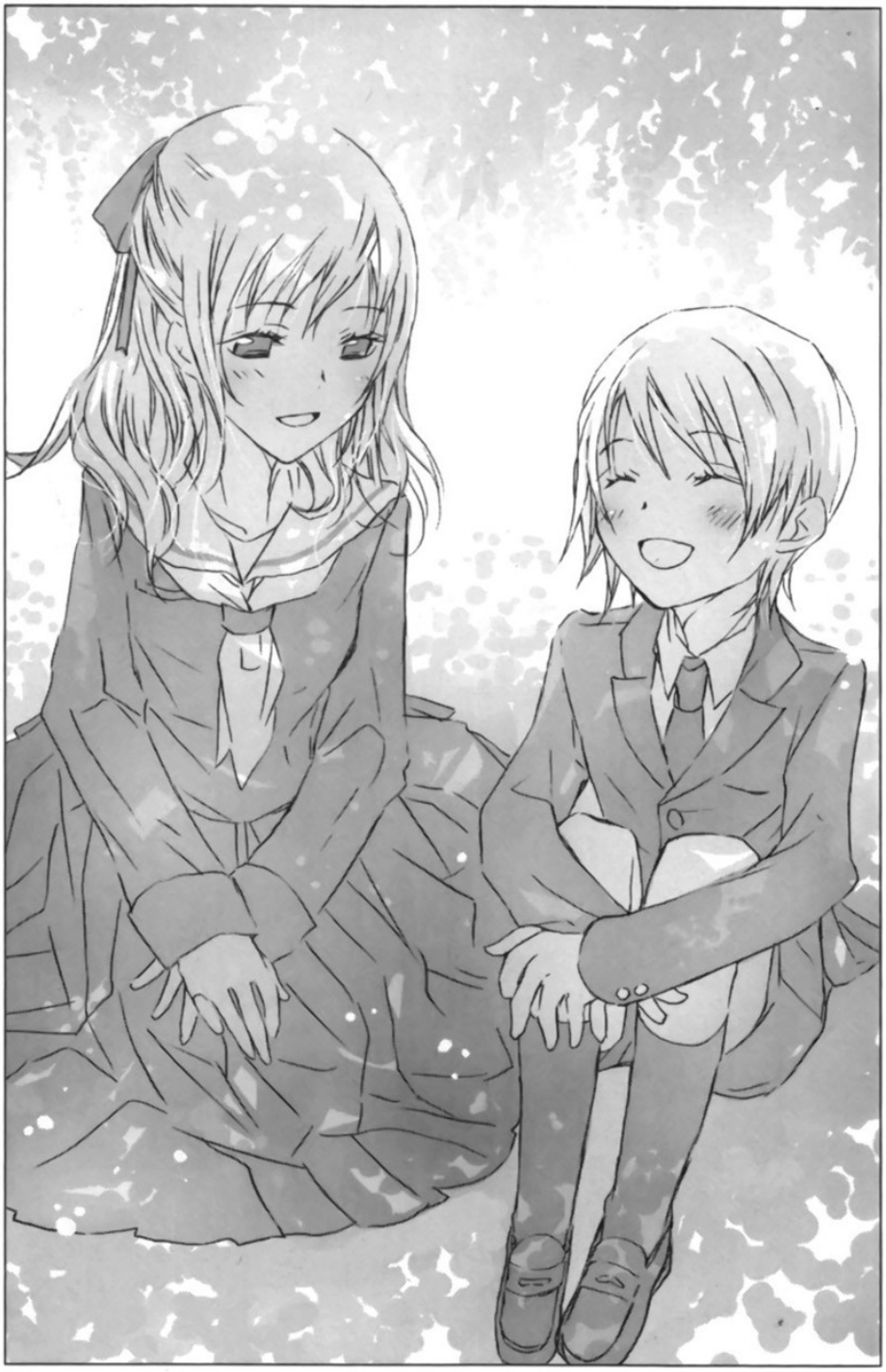
—You are the first year Koremitsu Akagi, no? Is this your first day attending school?

He looked at Koremitsu, beaming cheerfully.
(Hm? What's going on? Why is it that I'm thinking of the first time I met Hikaru? Is this the dying light I see before I die? I'm doomed.)
He still could not end up becoming like Hikaru. He would be scolded by Koharu, and make Honoka cry; neither was a fine option for him.
He anxiously looked around,

—Where is this place?

Before he realized it, Koremitsu found himself in a place filled with lush, just like a forest.
He lifted his head, and found a cloudless sky above him, the bright sun shining upon him. Purple Violets, yellow Dandelions, and white Clovers.
(Is this the fabled garden in heaven?)
If it was, surely it was getting worse for Koremitsu.
He heard that in such moments, the departed family members or close ones would come to welcome the dead. In his case, would it be the father of his who died when he was in elementary school? or Hikaru?
(I'm definitely not going with them.)
In any case, he had to find a way to get away from this place first.
Koremitsu decided to walk towards the forest.
There was warm air, birds chirping, and the rippling sound of flowing water.
The atmosphere was extremely tranquil, and the grass at the feet were soft.

The grass at the feet were also tender, and the flowers in the Spring swayed with the gentle breeze.
(Maybe it’s not a bad thing if I can live my life leisurely in such a place after I die…ack—I’m not dead yet.)
Koremitsu shook his head firmly.
Suddenly, giggles could be heard.
(Is there anyone?)
There was delighted laughter, akin to birds chirping. There was not one, but two people laughing heartily.
This blissful atmosphere was such that Koremitsu worried that if such a savage looking man was to suddenly barge in and interrupt them, it would be awkward. Thus, he hid behind the trees, watching them.
(!)
The sight in front him caused him to gasp.
The numerous Wisterias entangling the trees were draping many purple Wisterias. Whenever the wind blew, the little petals would sway left and right, gently falling.
The falling petals gave off a tender light under the sunlight, and new Wisteria petals fell upon them. They were elegant, tender, falling one after another, and it felt as though this would last all of eternity.
It was a waterfall of Wisterias.
A girl, probably 15, 16 in age, was side by side with a boy in 1st grade, seated in the pile of purple Wisterias gathered at the bottom.
It seemed they were whispering something to each other, and they brought their faces to each other, giggling.
Their faces were extremely identical. Both of them had crystal clear white skin, clear eyes, and soft lips. The girl’s soft hair was long enough to reach her hair, and was absorbing the sunlight, looking utterly dazzling. The boy’s hair too seemed to be glowing like an angelic’s halo.



The Wisterias falling from above surrounded the duo, and the girl with dazzling hair and slender shoulders sat with her legs crossed, her skirt spread.
A boy neatly piled the petals upon her legs.
Such a beautiful, Sacred scene riveted Koremitsu's heart more than any painting or movie he had seen.
With her white, long fingers, the girl grabbed a violet petal that landed on the boy's tender lips, showing a smile.
The boy happily showed a smile.
Both of them loved each other so much they could not help themselves.
They were thoroughly lost in their blissful world just be being together.
They were smiling at each other with such eyes.
The boy approached the girl, his eyes sparkling with innocence.

—Hey, are you willing to be with me forever? For—you are the one I love most in the world.

The girl acted like the boy's older sister, gently answering his childish whim.

—It is impossible to do so 'forever'. Do you not have to return back to Tokyo once Spring break ends?

—I do not wish to go back. I want to stay here—I want to be with you.

—No can do. If you do not go back, your father will be sad.

But…
The boy looked lonely, and the girl kissed him gently on his cheek.
It was a touch on the most precious item.

—You do not have to worry. We can meet again in the next vacation. During that time, I shall be here no matter what.

—You will be here during the next summer vacation and the vacation after that?

—Yes, always.

The boy's cheeks blushed, and again his eyes showed a glint of delight.

—Can we watch the Wisterias together?

The girl's lips curled into a sweet smile.

—The Wisterias only bloom in Spring, but we can look for flowers that resemble Wisterias together.

—Yes! It is a promise then! We shall look at the Wisterias together in Spring, and once they wilt, we shall look for the Wisterias fallen on the ground together. We will do this, forever.

Anyone would probably smile upon hearing the word ‘forever’ from such a young boy.
The girl’s eyes squinted amicably,

—Of course. It is a promise.

And she raised her pinky.
However, the boy suddenly got up, bent down, and placed his tender lips on the girl’s lips.

—Men and women do this when they promise to be together forever, right?.
&nsp;
The girl blushed, and covered her lips with her hand.
The boy in turn looked worried,

—Am I wrong?
He asked, and the girl put her hand down, smiling,

—No. But…you cannot do this to any other girl.
The boy’s face glittered, and with all his might,

—I understand! So, please do this to me too.

The girl widened her eyes, and again, she lowered her eyes, looking slightly flustered as she faltered. She lifted her head tentatively, and in an instance, kissed the lips of the boy who was giving her an expectant look.
The boy beamed as brightly as the sun at noon.

—So we will be together next year, the year after, and every year after that!.

—Yes, we shall always be together.

The girl blushed, and with a shy, tender look, she muttered,

—While we are away from each other, I too will pray. I pray that—I will becoming the happiest person in the world.

—Then I will too! I will also pray to God! I will pray—that you will have a very, very happy life, always smiling.

The happy lovey dovey moments filled the blissful time. So embarrassed, so delighted they were, and yet what a sacred time passed.
The sweet stares entwined around each other gave the vibe of a fantasy.
During this time, the violet Wisterias fluttered with the breeze, and the petals fell silently upon them, gathering by their feet.
So elegant, yet so sweet, they gently fell.
It was a silent gentle waterfall of Wisterias.
Koremitsu's heart was griped as he watched such a scene.
The promise they both had would never be fulfilled.
Koremitsu knew that.
The girl called out the boy's name endearingly,

—Mr Hikaru.

And the boy looked delighted as he answered.

—Miss Fujino.

A gust blew.
The Wisterias swayed violently, and his vision was clouded by their violet petals. They danced in the air, and it was a tender, elegant, sacred, and adorable violet.
On the other side of the petals, the laughters of the girl and the young boy, Fujino and Hikaru, gradually faded.

The violet Wisteria petals filling the vision gradually lessened, and once his vision cleared again,
Replacing the girl and the boy standing in front of Koremitsu was a 15-year-old Hikaru, showing a faint smile.
He was dressed in school uniform, white-sleeved shirt and trousers, not even a single elegant Wisteria to be seen in his Wisteria fence, and the many petals that fell had completely vanished.
The season transpired from Spring to Summer, and the green grass swayed with the breeze, giving off a refreshing fragrance.

“Was that you and Fujino just now?”

Koremitsu asked, and Hikaru answered,
“Yes…”
With that beautiful, forlorn smile,
“This place was where I first met that person…she was standing under those falling Wisteria, and asked me “You are Mr Hikaru, no?” Her voice was delightful, like a goddess.”
Koremitsu recalled the duo chortling away under the fluttering Wisteria branches.
They were both innocent and pretty, looking utterly blissful.
Back then, Fujino was of a similar age to Koremitsu was at this point.
Though she remained a beauty, the past Fujino was so optimistic, so vibrant, compared to the current self, though beautiful, had a face clouded with gloom. Her lips were often beaming like the petals, and she was radiant.
If it was that girl appearing on the other end of the violet waterfall, smiling, surely Koremitsu would have assumed her to be a goddess.
Fujino once looked afar with an anguish look, indicating that there existed a special encounter that would occur in an instance.
Just as Hikaru fell in love with Fujino on first sight, Fujino probably felt that the effeminate boy looking back at her, piling the petals on her hair and shoulders was adorable, and was mesmerized by him.
What Koremitsu just saw was certainly the scene lingering in Hikaru’s heart.
“During that period, we were not really bothered by the relationship of aunt and nephew, stepmother and stepson, and it was really a wonderful time… we
would chat under the Wisterias until the sun set, and we were covered by the petals, falling into dreamland, or leisurely strolling through the forest together, learning flower names…or play in the river while in our clothes, getting ourselves wet…”
The playful girl and boy.
Made a promise to view the Wisterias in the next Spring together, and the following Spring, and the one after.

An eternal oath.
So naive, so innocent—yet so heartfelt.

—It is a promise.

—Yes, it is.

Fujino was never always so gloomy, anguished.
She did not become an adult so suddenly. She had a time when she was still a youthful, radiant girl, a history of being with Hikaru. As a bystander, Koremitsu felt his heart gripped by the warm, blissful history.
Perhaps, during the painful moments when Fujino began to stray away from him, when both of them did not talk with each other, Hikaru would open this inner room to reminisce the past.
And then, he found the beautiful days they could no longer head back to, his heart left broken as a result.
With a distant look similar to Fujino's, Hikaru said,
"When I had a fever, that person was always beside me, taking care of me… she kissed me while I was asleep…so…I too kissed her when she was tired and sleeping."
"You really were a pervert since young, huh."
"I do wish to her if she is someone I do like. it is normal."
"What is normal about preferring kissing to a pinky swear?"
"But I really believed that I had to kiss if I wanted to make a promise."
"You weren't playing dumb there, right?"
Koremitsu looked utterly skeptical, and Hikaru immediately denied,
"No, of course not. I was never such a scheming person."
"But you never abided by your promise not to kiss other girls."
Once he retorted, Hikaru gulped,
"Erm, that, I thought, was that I could not kiss any other girl when the promise was in place…"
"You gave girls flower rings at the back garden in your 3rd grade, and swore that you would love them forever. You're telling me that you never kissed them?"
"I did not! Not at all!"
"Not at all?"
"Erm…I would do so from time to time after I grew older…that promise was invalid once that person married my father."
"You really are a perverted prince."
"Do not call me that! At least call me a harem prince instead!"
Hikaru exclaimed in protest, and suddenly lowered his head, his eyes looking bleak,
"…I suppose it is because of this fact that our wishes were never fulfilled."
He muttered sadly,

“If I had only kissed that person in my entire life, will we be able to be together forever?”
Koremitsu’s heart was gripped.
The promise between man and woman, Hikaru and Fujino, would never be fulfilled.
And because of that, both of them had to be tortured endlessly.
As Fujino had said, their meeting was a misfortune in itself.
Koremitsu muttered to Hikaru as the latter kept his head down,
“…When you received that letter from Fujino, you knew why she called you out, didn’t you?”
“…”
Hikaru bit his lower lip, remaining silent for a little while, and started explaining,
Perhap Hikaru dragged Koremitsu to such a place because he wanted to explain this matter…
“…I graduated from Middle School, and once I was thoroughly rejected by that person at the resort, I was really anxious. I began to consume a pile of flu medication, nearly drowned myself in the pool in the middle of the night, slit my wrists, and played such tomfoolery that the ambulance was required to deport me to hospital. I nearly died, and I had a hard time living.”
‘You’re really calm at this.”
The slash marks Tsuyako was concerned about were probably from that time.
Looking at how few people knew about it, perhaps Hikaru bandaged it himself after all? Humans do not die that easily.
But even so, Hikaru was suffering so much, struggling. Even though Hikaru went out with so many girls, Fujino was still the dearest to him, his first love, the lone, unrivalled flower.
“But during Spring break, when I saw you knocked down by the truck to save the old man, my heart was filled with hope. I really wanted to say ‘If I have him as my friend, will things take a turn for the better’?”
“Why mention this so suddenly?”
Koremitsu frowned, asking.
He was thoroughly bandaged, lashed at by Koharu, and did not attend the opening ceremony. Would anyone else of the same age, having witnessed someone knocked down by a truck, think of a bright future as Hikaru did?
Hikaru quietly smiled,
“You really were a fated encounter for me. The reason why I decided to actually go out with Miss Aoi for real was because of you…it was only a few days before you came to our school that I learned of that person’s pregnancy, but I did not think of the possibility of the child being mind, so I was really so depressed, so heartbroken because of that. But I was thinking “Ahh, now it is really over. I can really end it now…I want to be friends with you, and I shall protect Miss Aoi and Miss Aoi alone”…”
Hikaru seemed to be watching a distant dream as he muttered,

“I arranged for the birthday presents to Miss Aoi before I left for the resort during Golden Week. That person just so happened to be there too, and I told her that I wanted to date Miss Aoi. I thought it would all end like that, that she and I could finally be liberated from the long suffering we had. Alas —”

Hikaru’s face lost its smile, his eyes looking bleak.

“That person did not look happy at all.”

Hikaru’s little hiss caused Koremitsu’s heart to jolt.

“Instead of that, she gave me a look of despair.”

Koremitsu could easily imagine Fujino’s expression.

Because that was surely the same face as what Hikaru was showing.

It felt as though Hikaru was pushed into the darkness, an endless abyss as he showed that dark, hollow expression. His frozen face was coupled with his slightly quivering lips.

Hikaru clasped his hands together, looking as though he was giving a confession as he lowered his head weakly,

“Back then, Koremitsu…I was thoroughly lured by the despair shown in that person’s eyes, and my soul was about to rush out of my body…I had decided to spent my future with Miss Aoi—my heart felt so warm, so satisfied because of that, and I thought I could forget about that person once and for all. I thought that together with her, I could be forgiven, liberated and happy.

The anguished voice of one robbed of his chance for redemption stabbed into Koremitsu’s heart, one knife at a time.

Hikaru did love Aoi. He really yearned a future to be with Aoi.

(But even so, that wasn’t good enough?)

Again Koremitsu felt Hikaru’s despair, and quizzed in his heart.

“When that person gave me a chiding look, I understood. The pain will never end. No matter who I ended up with in the future, I could never give up my thoughts for that person. The moment I was encapsulated by those person’s dark, alluring eyes, I again understood that I could never forget about that person.”

The reason why the two of them were so similar was because they yearned each other so much.

Fujino once said that such a rabid love was no different from a curse. Narcissus, who fell in love with his handsome self reflected on the water surface, became frail and feeble because of the love that could never be fulfilled, and finally, he became a flower. However, Narcissus was the fortunate one for finally meeting his end, for he did not have to suffer anymore.

Hikaru and Fujino’s love never reached a conclusion. They both knew very well that the one they loved most was each other. Thus, no matter how painful it was, they could never put an end of it. The new hope because a new despair.

It was because they realized this that Hikaru was utterly weary.

It was because he once had such a hope that his despair was stronger than it used to be. It was so painful it felt as though his gut was bitten. Even so, he had to continue living.
What Tsuyako was so worried about, and what Asai predicted, all became reality.
Hikaru yearned death.
“I came to the riverbank in the middle of the night, and that person pointed the knife at me, asking ‘Why did you have to make this decision’. I would have been fine with it if it was jealousy at MIss Aoi, but that was not the case.

—Why did you make that decision?

As the storm blew and the rains poured onto the dim riverbank, Fujino pointed the knife at Hikaru, asking,
Why did you make such a decision? It is futile for you to do this.
How much more despair do you still wish for?
“That person gave me a painful look, saying that she wanted to end our suffering, that there was no other way other than for our existences to vanish completely from this world. I…too did think that way…I thought that person was the one who grabbed my arm when I fell into the river, and was about to be swept away. It was impossible for a girl to pull a boy like me up with her strength, and if that kept up, she would have drowned as well. I knew that even if I did make it onto land and save my own life, that person and I will suffer the same regrets, the same pains, so…”
Koremitsu muttered,
“So—you said **‘that is enough’**.”
Back then, Hikaru surely did give a relieved smile.
And then, he let of of his hand.
That was what happened in the stormy night, everything that Hikaru withheld from Koremitsu till the very end.
Hikaru however frowned sadly,
“In the end, even though I died, nothing did change. Everyone wept at the funeral, Miss Aoi yelled angrily at my photo ‘You liar’…yet that person, she continued to smile. Even though I am to vanish from this world, nothing will change. The pain will continue. Once I died, that person understood that what was supposed to be salvation was not it at all. The me inside her heart remains a curse…so, she could only smile.”
Koremitsu recalled the smile Fujino showed at the funeral.
The tears rolled down her cheeks, yet her lips showed a smile.
It was serene, genial, somewhat delighted. Having witnessed Fujino’s pain, and having heard her confession, Koremitsu understood that it was not a smile born out of delight.
As Hikaru said, all Fujino could only do was smile.
Hikaru bore the same guilt, and he became a corpse.

But even so, she could not be redeemed.
She could not give up on her obsession.
Nothing could end.
Realizing this anguish and sorrow was supposed to be a routine for him.
Nothing else, other than a smile, could maintain his sanity.
Aoi directed her anguish into hatred, trying to forget Hikaru's death, and just like her, Fujino continued to accept the torment upon her guilt-riddened future, and barely managed to maintain her sanity.
Both Fujino and Aoi, the flowers who anguished at Hikaru's demise, caused Koremitsu's heart to writhe.
"You idiot."
With a heavy tone, he muttered,
"Why did you have to give up, saying that 'it's enough'? It's just as you did when we were supposed to deliver Aoi's presents. You just said 'that is enough', wanting to give up. Like that's going to happen."

—Koremitsu…that is enough.

—Forget about it.

Hikaru knew very well that Koremitsu was trying his best to approach Aoi,and was pushing her to her limit. Back then, he muttered with such a frigid, faint smile.
He said that he could no longer give Aoi any happiness because he was a ghost.
Koremitsu yelled at Hikaru at the roof, saying that he would convey Hikaru's feelings to her, so Hikaru should not give up,
Hikaru noted wearily,
"Yes. It was insufficient at all. I should not have let go of my hand back then.
I should have struggled until the very end. If I could have been your friend sooner, perhaps the outcome would have changed. I should not have given up until the very end, just as how we delivered the presents to Miss Aoi. Perhaps this might save that person's heart, and I may still remain on this world."
With an anguished look, he said, showing a poised look thereafter,
"However, it is pointless to talk about it now. Let us think of what is to come."
Hikaru's voice became optimistic.
Ever since then, Hikaru never said the words 'that is enough'.
So Koremitsu said,
"Right, we can't be yapping away right now. Got to convey your feelings to the woman you love most."
The conversation they had on the roof.
Just speak up, and I'll definitely fulfill your wish.

That apprehensive stare Hikaru gave back then was now filled with utmost trust, directed at Koremitsu,

“I shall leave it to you, Koremitsu.”

“Alright, leave it to me.”

Koremitsu too gave the radiant smile he could not give back then.
♢
♢ ♢
“Akagi, wake up! Akagi!”
The first voice entering his ears was Honoka’s, pleading for him.
Koremitsu opened his eyes, a soft towel draped around his body, and found that he was not outdoors, but indoors. Honoka’s eyebrows were raised, and it appeared she was desperately trying not to cry—giving Koremitsu a feeble yet feisty look. Upon seeing that face, Koremitsu heaved a sigh of relief.
(Ah, I’m back.)
The flower of love that blooms towards the sun—the purple Heliotrope.
Koremitsu’s flower.
“Shikibu…”
Koremitsu’s cheeks and lips naturally relaxed.
“You id—”
Honoka looked to be on the verge of tears, and just when she was about to tell Koremitsu off furiously, she blushed, unable to say anything.
“Big brother Koremitsu!”
Pushing aside Honoka and grabbing Koremitsu was Shioriko.
“Thank goodness! You finally woke up. Miss Shikibu isn’t the only one calling for your name. Shiiko has been doing so too! It just so happened that Miss Shikibu managed to squeeze by your side and shout right at you! Shiiko has been shouting your name more times than her.”
Shioriko buried her head near Koremitsu’s neck, wailing as she yapped.
“You’re alright, Shiiko.”
Koremitsu felt relieved inside, and he reached a hand out to pat Shioriko on her head. The latter then lifted her face, her large eyes filled with tears as she puffed her cheeks, glaring at Koremitsu,
“Why didn’t you come save Shiiko? Shiiko has been waiting for you to save her, big brother! Shiiko’s hands and legs were tied, her mouth were sealed tight, and she was locked inside a safe. She couldn’t breathe, and nearly died, but Shiiko kept believing that you would definitely come save her, big brother! A-an-and in the end—Shiiko doesn’t want that kind of person saving her!!!!!”
Shioriko bawled out loud as she pointed a finger with much disdain. The ‘kind of person’ she despised was Tōjō.
It seemed he was the one who saved her.

Ever since Shioriko's good friend Lapis went to the Tōjō, Shioriko had despised him as though he was an abductor, and she probably felt displeased to owe him a favor.
"I thought it was big brother Koremitsu who arrived, but when I woke up, I was holding this guy! It's terrible! My body and soul is stained! Disinfect me now!"
"Akagi, I swear that I did not do anything."
Tōjō hastily explained.
"Ah, I got it. Thanks for saving Shiiko, upperclassman Tōjō."
Tōjō was flabbergasted to hear Koremitsu address him as 'upperclassman' for the first time.
"I never thought there would be a day when you would actually call me 'upperclassman'."
"Shiiko, thank everyone properly now."
"Uu…thanks. But, I won't forgive you for carrying me here—I thought it would be a Princess carry. I was so nervous my heart's pounding when I had my eyes closed! And it hurt when the tape was ripped off me!"
"That was not me. It was Asai—"
Tōjō's stare was directed at Asai, who did not speak till this point.
"The pain will only last for that moment if I were to rip it off at once, no?"
Asai noted coldly.
Beyond that—
"…Asa, I did ask you to please be gentle about this, right?"
"Ahaha, Miss Asai certainly looks rather delicate, but is unexpectedly clumsy."
"Ahh~, so this is how the Matriarch Asa is really like."
"Yes yes, Asai never showed any delicacy at all~"
Aoi, Tsuyako, Hiina joined in, followed by Kazuaki. This left Koremitsu dumbfounded.
"I do not wish to be told off by any of you for not being delicate."
Asai coldly frowned, and explained the situation to Koremitsu. Tōjō, Asai and Aoi went off to save Shioriko, and in the meantime, Tsuyako and Hiina were headed to Koremitsu and the others by the riverside. Kazuaki only joined them later.
It seemed the one who got Koremitsu out from the river was the rescue team called in by Mikoto.
They contacted Koremitsu's family member the previous day, stating that Shioriko was fine. However, Koremitsu was curious as to who the 'family member' was, whether it was his aunt Koharu or his grandfather Masakaze. If the was the latter, Koremitsu would be in trouble. Surely Masakaze would kick up a fuss and ask why such a serious matter was hidden from him alone.
Mikoto, Fujino and Michiru were not present.
Honoka followed up, stating that Fujino and Michiru were resting in their rooms. Mikoto was with Fujino.

“How’s Hanasato doing?”
“She’s not hurt because you protected her, Akagi. I don’t think she slept at all the past few days. She is sleeping soundly now.”
Honoka looked a little gloomy.
However, she immediately beamed, saying,
“I’m relieved that you finally woke up. I’ll be going over to Michiru now then. I hope that I can be by her bedside when she wakes up.’
“Oh…go ahead then.”
“Right, see you later.”
Honoka walked out of the room.
At that moment, Koremitsu realized that on a closer look, Honoka’s eyes were red.
She was not the only one. Aoi, Asai, Tsuyako, and Shioriko who had her body sprawled over Koremitsu, puffing her cheeks, “Miss Shikibu doesn’t have to come back now”, had red eyes. Even Yū, standing silently right beside them, giving him a fleeting, hollow stare, was the same.
(I made everyone worry…)
Koremitsu’s heart was griped, and at the same time, once he realized how many people were worried for him, a warmth slowly flowed through his body.
“Goodness, I was really worried too, Mr Akagi! There is no way you can get a decent doctor in a rural resort, and I said many times to get a helicopter to a Mikados’ hospital, but that evil Asai kept refuting my suggestions. It is all her fault if you are to die~!! But it is a good thing that you are alive~! That is
because I infused my power of friendship into you~!”
Leaving aside whatever that power of friendship it, I’m thinking that you were trying to get to me in some way, Koremitsu immediately decided. It seemed Kazuaki did believe in the power of friendship once Kazuaki woke up,
“To make you livelier than before, I shall infuse more friendship power into you, Mr Akagi~”
and he grabbed Koremitsu from opposite Shioriko.
“Woah!”
Koremitsu sat upright in shock.
The sudden action caused Shioriko to nearly slip from the bed,
“Ya!”
She exclaimed.
“Hey, stop it already.”
“There is no need to be ashamed about it. It is normal for friends to save this.”
Kazuaki grabbed Koremitsu by the neck, unwilling to let go.
(**You’re** not normal at all!)
Just when Koremitsu was about to push Kazuaki away,
“…Mr Kazuaki. If you wish to be Mr Akagi’s friend…I do feel…that is

not…how you should do it…”
Everyone present gathered their eyes upon the owner of the voice.
The once staring at Kazuaki with a fleeting expression was actually Yū.
(That was Yū saying that, right?0
Kazuaki, who was chided, looked as stupefied as he was when he got slapped
by Yū.
And Tōjō, who had a one-sided crush on Yū, widened his eyes as well.
“You can’t…just keep conveying your feelings…if you are friends…you have to think of Mr Akagi’s sake…”
Yū’s voice was soft as she stammered. However, her tone was adamant, and surely,nobody would not have missed out on what she said.
Kazuaki’s cheeks immediately blushed. He let go of Koremitsu, and said in a huff,
“I-I know that! You do not have the right to be nagging at me here, Yū~! Also, I am much~older than you are, and my social etiquette is much better than you ex-NEET.”
Tsuyako, who remained terrified of Kazuaki even till this point, and Aoi, who remained wary of Kazuaki, gave Yū startled and admiring looks.
Asai scowled, and Hiina beamed, having found this to be amusing.
(Yū…got stronger.)
Koremitsu felt a delight in his warming heart as he witnessed first hand the change Yū had.
(I guess she’s fine even without me taking care of her)
Koremitsu pulled the blanket aside, and stepped onto the floor. Aoi noted worriedly,
“Mr Akagi. You should have a rest.”
Tsuyako too stopped him,
“Yes. Do not force yourself.”
Koremitsu diverted his stare beyond them.
His friend was showing a tender expression, standing there.
He exchanged looked with Hikaru, and his lips curled into a smile.
“I’m feeling fine now. Right now, I still have something to do.”
Feeling extremely relieved, Koremitsu declared to Aoi and the rest.
“I made a promise with a friend.”
♢
♢ ♢
Fujino was not in her room.
Koremitsu got onto the car Asai arranged for, and went to the hometown of Hikaru’s mother From there, he walked to a nearby forest.
The forest was about to welcome a winter colder than it was. The trees were covered with red leaves, and the brown leaves fallen onto the ground were dried. The air too was frosty, but the sun shining down from above was bright and clear.
With the eyes as clear as that sunlight, Hikaru walked beside Koremitsu.

Soon after, Koremitsu found the scene he saw in Hikaru's inner room when he passed out.
His field of vision suddenly widened, and the rack of wild Wisterias entered his sights. Fujino had her hair let down as she kept her back turned on Koremitsu, seated under them.
Mikoto, who was standing quietly behind Fujino, noticed Koremitsu, and stealthily backed away from Fujino.
It was Mikoto who informed Koremitsu of this place when the latter inquired with regards to Fujino's whereabouts. For a long time, Mikoto watched
Fujino suffer from the forbidden love; one had to wonder what thoughts she harbored…
Koremitsu walked forth, hushing his footsteps.
The instance he passed by Mikoto, they met each other in the eyes.
Koremitsu nodded at Mikoto, and with her refreshing eyes, Mikoto indicated "Please."
What Koremitsu saw in his dream was the green Wisteria vines that bloomed; whenever the spring breeze came, violet Wisterias would rain upon them. At this point, those Wisterias did not exist; only the vines, a little brown at this point, were left behind. Fujino stared at this void, and Koremitsu stopped beside her.
"You met Hikaru at this place, right? He said he thought you were a goddess."
The white, slender shoulders quivered slightly.
With tears lingering in her eyes, Fujino looked forward, not saying anything at all.
"…"
"You two would play at the river, not caring that your clothes got wet."
"…"
"You two also checked on the names of the flowers, strolling in the forest."
"…"
"When Hikaru had a fever, you remained by his side and took care of him."
"…"
"You made a promise with Hikaru that you'll be together forever—"
"Why are you stating this now?"
Fujino finally spoke up.
The feeble voice asking Hikaru sounded so feeble, and it was a hidden plea, hoping that Koremitsu would not continue to pester her. Her faltering eyes were filled with anguish.
Upon seeing Fujino being like this, Hikaru too looked anguished.
Koremitsu noted seriously,
"Because I want you to remember. The time you spent with Hikaru wasn't just filled with sad things."
Fujino pulled the shawl on her shoulders, and shrank back, lowering her head. The feeble, tender voice eked from her pale lips.

“This morning…I received a notice from the Mikados main house. My husband managed to be alive…”
Isn’t that a good thing? While Koremitsu nearly blurted that out, he noticed the gloom in Fujino’s eyes, and swallowed those words back.
“But I do feel guilty for being unable to return to that man. When Miss Hiroka…brought the will my husband wrote…I read it. That person…knew everything about my relationship with mr Hikaru.”
Hikaru gasped, and Koremitsu was stunned.
(Hikaru’s dad knew about their relationship!?)
He knew of the relationship his wife and son had? he knew that his wife might not be bearing his own child, but his son’s child?
Hikaru widened his eyes, his face frozen.
With her eyebrows in a frown, Fujino shrank back invariably, seemingly guilt-riddened.
“But even so…that man never rebuked me, and he apologized to me many times for breaking the relationship between me and Mr Hikaru. He said that I looked really happy when I was with Hikaru, and he felt as though Mr Hikaru’s mother was still alive. So, he married me so that I could always be with Mr Hikaru…he wanted to personally protect me, who really resembled my older sister Kiriyo, and the child she left behind, Mr Hikaru…no matter what happens, the child inside my belly…will be deemed as the son of the Mikados’ head…”
Fujino’s voice was filled with helpless despair and agony, and Koremitsu too felt his heart writhe.
Hikaru was thoroughly stupefied by the shocking facts Fujino divulged, remaining still.
When did Hikaru’s father knew of the relationship between his wife and son?
What sort of feelings did he have when he viewed them? Why did he forgive the?
He forgave the twisted betrayal of the one he loved most—
Fujino embraced her quivering body.
“Nobody…wishes to judge me. Mr Hikaru…chose death so that I did not have to take action…nobody is left to judge me…”
She confessed her sins, was fearful because of her sins, suffered because of her guilt, but nobody was willing to judge her. She was never judged, nor forgiven. The fear she had as a survivor caused her to despair.
The white face paled further, and her eyes were filled with utter malaise.
The sin she committed with Hikaru was grave. At this point, she could not continue to live without being impeached.
However,
“You already suffered enough punishment. You have to continue living even after Hikaru died.”
Koremitsu solemnly noted, the voice heartfelt.

Hikaru, standing beside Koremitsu, too straightened his back as he sealed his lips.
I’m correct here, right, Hikaru? That’s what you wanted to say to Fujino, isn’t it? You didn’t want to ascend to the afterlife because of this incident, did
you?
Koremitsu silently affirmed in his heart, and he slowly voiced out every word in the tense air.
“Don’t restrain yourself too much.Don’t think of everything between you and Hikaru as a curse.”
“…”
Fujino kept her head lowered, not moving at all. None of the words could reach Fujino’s heart, for she rejected redemption.
So Koremitsu asked,
“Why did you want to meet me? Why did you contact me through Mikoto Ono?”
Fujino’s eyebrows quivered; the fingers clutching at the shawl shivered a little.
“Isn’t it because you want me to confirm the existence of Hikaru, which you denied, as his friend?”
Fujino utterly denied Hikaru, saying that it was fine if he was not born.
At the raging riverside in the middle of the night, she showed such a pale face, a gloomy expression.
But in fact,
“Isn’t it because you wish that I say, it’s great that Hikaru’s around? Isn’t it because you want someone to tell you that Hikaru too went through happy times?”
Koremitsu’s heart got increasingly hot as he watched Fujino with her eyelids lowered and lips sealed; with a firm tone, he declared,
“So I’m going to tell you this. Hikaru had a romantic relationship he could never get anything from; he was sad, really in pain, but he met many flowers,
and he really treasured them.”
How did Hikaru love.
How did Hikaru live.
“You know of Hikaru’s childhood friend, the white Hollyhock, right? Hikaru was afraid of being hated by her, so he never did anything to her. Because of that, she thought Hikaru never loved her, and lashed out loud at his funeral photo. Hikaru really treasured that Hollyhock though, and prepared
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presents for her birthday, planning to confess to her. The presents were delivered by me to him though. That Hollyhock was really happy, and cried a whole lot, saying that she loved Hikaru since young over and over again. Hikaru’s feelings were actually conveyed to her.”

—I love you most, Hikaru…I really love you…love you.

Back then, Aoi lifted her head as she watched the water droplets that fell like shooting stars, covering her mouth with her hands, muttering “I love you” to Hikaru, conveying the thoughts in her heart.
The pure, white Hollyhock dearest to Hikaru.
Hikaru’s ‘hope’—
“The Moonflower who was bullied at school, and shut herself in an old, tattered apartment was also saved by Hikaru. Hikaru would visit her and tell her about the many beautiful flowers growing outside. That Moonlight is now standing firmly on her feet, saying what she wants to say whenever she wants to!”
The fleeting Moonflower that bloomed in the middle of the night was Hikaru’s ‘healing’.
For her, the peaceful, tender time spent with Hikaru was solace for her forlorn soul.
With Hikaru around, Yū was able to have peaceful dreams in that dim room. Because of that, she was able to venture the world outside in her dreams, and then she walked out on her own will.
“The Purple Gromwell, whom Hikaru helped buy the house back and took care of, is now my little sister. That grandpa of mine who hates women so much really dotes on her. Thanks to her living in our house, it has gotten lively. It’s Hikaru who got us to know each other. Hikaru was worried about her, and didn’t wish for her to become like himself, unable to cry. She’s still young, so even though she’s so haughty and a brat at heart, Hikaru continued to watch over her kindly, minding that she doesn’t fall over.”

—Hikaru…thank you. I really love you.

Back then, she grabbed Koremitsu by the arm, saying the words she really wanted to say to Hikaru before he died. She then lifted her head towards where Koremitsu was looking at, crying as she said that. That girl was Hikaru’s ‘joy’.
Hikaru once noted with a look of ecstasy that he was really looking forward to seeing how much of an outstanding lady the girl would become.
“The red weeping cherry blossom kept thinking that she’s ugly, and obeyed what others told her to do. However, Hikaru found her before she bloomed, when she was still a pile of brown branches, and told her that one day, he would make her the most beautiful flower in in the garden. Right now, the red flowers on the branches have bloomed, making everyone stop to look at her and be mesmerized by them. It’s Hikaru who let her bloom! That red weeping cherry blossom also confided that even if God is to allow her to change fates with others, she’ll choose her fate now!”

—I really fell into an enchanting love with Hikaru.

—Hikaru's words allowed me to becoming the red dancing princess.

The one often showing a bright smile on her red lips was Hikaru's 'pride'. Hikaru's face was so radiant when he said that he could not find a girl any prettier.
No matter when it was, Hikaru was really devoted to his flowers.
He really loved the flowers he met, listened to their words, and continued to infuse them with the water called love.
"The Saffron Hikaru met over the internet was actually the Saffloer. He never did see her face, but he really liked her, saying that she's serious, gentle and unique, mysterious and charming. That Saffloer called Hikaru the 'Polar Star', saying that she'll definitely love him if she met him."
I like Mr Polar Star not because of his appearance, but because of his inner heart. I don't need to know how he looks like, because to me, Mr Polar Star is the most handsome boy in the world. Beni, with the orange sunstone Brooch pinned to her chest, declared this—she was Hikaru's 'mystery'.
Having seen Beni's unique face, Hikaru did not falter in the slightest, instead saying *'it is cute!* ' from the bottom of his heart. This caused Koremitsu to realize that Hikaru was not simply a frivolous harem prince, and a different opinion was formed, that Hikaru was a man amongst men.
"The Morning Glory closest to Hikaru gave up her dreams of building a Tsuchinoko Theme Park to protect Hikaru, becoming a dictator who likes playing those conspiracy plans. Hikaru knows that the infuriating Morning Glory is actually a devoted, cute girl. Since elementary school, he made a promise with that Morning Glory to go on an adventure together!"

—You…came to pass on Hikaru's message to me, as his friend?

Asai cried as she watched the field of blooming Morning Glories. She was a reliable girl, Hikaru's guardian'.
Hikaru was so concerned with his infamously overbearing childhood friend, always stating, 'Asa is a kind person at heart'.
"Hikaru was sincere to the Broom Tree that was so similar to you. Like you, the Broom Tree kept trying to escape from Hikaru, and Hikaru really was grateful for encountering her. Because of Hikaru, that broom Tree understood how charming of a flower she is, and I can say that she's a changed person."

—Goodbye, Mr Hikaru.
Sora, who embraced Koremitsu in school as everyone else looked on, whispered farewell. She was Hikaru's 'yearning',
"The Tachibana flower that tried to replace you, and that Poppy that did a lot of bad things, they loved Hikaru so much they went crazy, but Hikaru never gave up on them."

—Koremitsu, I do think I understand how Miss Hanasato became like that. I too was on the verge of going mad when that person told me that she had father's child. Miss Hanasato is still the 'grace' of that instance, a cute white Tachibana flower that has a memorable fragance.

—I do apologize for what happened with my brother, but I do wish that you get along well with him. He is born as the eldest son of the Mikados, and he probably was suffering, having to live while hiding his true self.

Hikaru really showed utmost care for those flowers.
He really watched over them.
He really loved them.
The flowers loved by Hikaru were so blissful.
Hikaru's eyes were so tender, so satiated as he watched those beautiful flowers bloom.
Fujino continued to keep her head lowered, her eyes showing some deep anguish.
But her lips slowly opened, and a voice she desperately eked out entered Koremitsu's ears.

"Did Hikaru…really live a happy life?"

Koremitsu sensed that the voice that might freeze in the air contained Fujino's earnest wishes, and he felt his heart filled.

—While we are away from each other, I too will pray. I pray that—I will becoming the happiest person in the world.

Fujino, who was still a young girl back then, made that promise with the young Hikaru with her clear voice.
Mikoto once said that when Fujino first met Hikaru, she found him to be really beautiful, innocent, cute, an angel whom she swore to God she would keep happy.
(You always wished for Hikaru's happiness, right? You thought you ruined his happiness.)
This, more than the pain of being unable to touch him, more than the fear of being unable to see the future, tormented Fujino more, and till this point, was lashing at her heart.
It was she who made the dearest person to her so unhappy.
It was she, more than anyone else, who wished for Hikaru to be happy, and she robbed the bright future Hikaru should have.
She said they should not have met.
She said Hikaru should be born in a world without Fujino.
And with that, Hikaru would attain happiness. Hikaru would not be

tormented and despaired by his 15 years of life, and lost it.
She actually loved Hikaru, earnestly hoping that he would be happy—wishing that he would be the happiest person in the world!
Fujino bit her lower lip, her shoulders shivering. The lowered eyelids were showing tears. Hikaru watched her with an anguished expression.
Fujino could not hear Hikaru's voice.
So Koremitsu kept pouring his emotions into his shout,
He loudly declared Hikaru's thoughts to the flower dearest to him,

"Yeah!! Hikaru really had a fortunate life!"

Fujino only saw Hikaru's sad looks. It was this friend of Hikaru informing her that that was just one side to Hikaru.
She said Hikaru was unfortunate?
That he should not have been born?
Not at all!
"How can anyone not be happy, to be loved by so many flowers, to love all his flowers with all his might?"
Koremitsu filled his chest with the refreshing Winter air below the Wisteria vines where both Hikaru and Fujino made their promises, saying,
"I'm fortunate to meet Hikaru too! A lot of wonderful things happened! A lot of happy moments occurred! It's Hikaru who brought these moments to me!"
Hikaru would talk with his gentle, sweet voice to Koremitsu, who was only able to name a few flowers, rattling about stories of the Silk Tree or the Chinese Trumpet Vine, or preaching that the girls were all flowers. Thanks to Hikaru's appearance, Koremitsu did not feel shunned by his classmates as he was before.
Surely, he never would have a chance to go to the theme park or the pool if he did not become friends with Hikaru. Ever since that encounter, Hikaru yelled at the riverbank *"Koremitsu is my friend!* ", and consoled Koremitsu whenever the latter was feeling downhearted. Because of the culture festival, Koremitsu was accepted by his classmates, and they shared their delight with him.
There really were countless incidents where Koremitsu would be so fortunate, thinking "It's great to have Hikaru around!"
With a teary smile, Hikaru listened to Koremitsu's words. His lips were quivering slightly,, and the eyes that should not be able to cry were actually filled with tears.
Fujino too lifted her exquisite face stiffly, looking up at Koremitsu with the same teary eyes as Hikaru.
Koremitsu stared back at Fujino passionately, telling her adamantly,
"Hikaru's definitely fortunate! But he still has his lingering thoughts to his flowers, and he can't leave!! That's why I promised to be his representative. You're the last one!!"

The wisteria Hikaru loved.
Hikaru's final burden.
"Didn't you make a promise with Hikaru that you'll be with him forever? I don't care whether you sinned or not; if you can't forget about Hikaru, don't forget about him then. You got to remember Hikaru and make sure he lives in your heart forever. Your happiness is Hikaru's greatest wish!"
In the distant past, Hikaru looked up at the girl Fujino under the Wisteria vines, earnestly stating,

—Then I will too! I will also pray to God! I will pray—that you will have a very, very happy life, always smiling.

Just as Hikaru built a room in his heart to reminisce the wonderful days he spent with Fujino, Koremitsu too wished for Fujino to firmly lock the wonderful memories she made with Hikaru in her heart.
Fujino's lips were quivering. Perhaps she recalled the innocent conversation they had under the Wisterias back then. She sobbed, her eyes filled with tears.
"You got to live on. When you're finally able to smile even after bearing all the guilt and punishment, Hikaru won't have any more wishes left!"
Hikaru gave Fujino a pleading look.
The promise and wishes could never be fulfilled. Even so, as long as their beloved obtained happiness, as long as she felt that this encounter was irreplaceable—
Fujino trembled, eking each word with a feeble voice,
"I am…fortunate."
A beautiful tear fell from her eye.
"That Mr Hikaru was able to be born…that I met Mr Hikaru…"
The frigid, white whites clasped in front of the shawl. Koremitsu—and Hikaru watched with bated breath as Fujino's voice melted in the frosty forest air.
With tears in her eyes, a heart-wrenching glint filled her eyes.
"I…loved Mr Hikaru."
That was the other feeling Fujino had.
The truth Fujino hid.
Even though it was painful, even though she denied it, she loved Hikaru.
She was happy when both of them made the promise.
Koremitsu saw clear, transparent droplets seep from Hikaru's eyes, a few of them dripping onto the white cheeks, fluttering like the Wisterias.
(Hikaru, have you realized it? You're crying.)
A depressed Hikaru would note forlornly 'I cannot cry'. At this point, he was crying.
(Ah, such beautiful tears.)
They struggled at the bottom of the vortex of violet Wisterias, suffocated by the love. At this point, the love finally ended.

“Thank you. Now Hikaru will be able to head off to the other world.”
Koremitsu bowed.
Fujino continued to weep, with an adorable, tragic expression on her face as she looked to Koremitsu’s side. Did she notice Hikaru beside him? Or was it that she was speaking to the distant past where they both spoke innocently under the Wisterias?”
Fujino sobbed, muttering,
“Goodbye.”
And so, Hikaru, with tears on his face, beamed, answering gently,

“Farewell.”
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It really does feel good to cry, Koremitsu.
It feels like all the sticky, vexing emotions within my body was washed away with the tears.
Right now, I am able to reminisce many things with a thoroughly refreshed attitude.
I loved that person so much that my heart was breaking, aching so much I wanted to shout.
I experienced the dark days where I could not see the future, and also others.
With the thoughts I could not sever no matter what, that person and I were only despairing in the bottom of the Wisteria abyss.
I had to give up on that person.
But I could not.
Once I saw the mirror, that person’s tragic face would appear on it. I really wished to go mad immediately, but I was in such pain that I was almost there.
In fact, I could not allow myself to go past my breaking point.
At those moment, whenever I returned home, I could hear the Middle School boys in front of me talking.
One of them had his head lowered dejectedly, and the other was patting him on the shoulder, saying,
“Cheer up. You only had a breakup. Don’t you have me?”
“Thanks…it’s great to have you as a friend.”
Before I realized, I found myself staring at the back of those two with admiring eyes.

I wish to have friends.

With a friend, I could discuss with him in such situations. I could share this pain, and surely I could move forward.
I yearned for it.
And that wish came true. I met you, Koremitsu.

A red-haired who ran right at a truck to save an old man—a boy of my age was willing to fight for others. Back then, I thought you were strong and amazing, like a hero.
Right, the friend I wished to have back when I was younger was a boy who was like a hero!
I want to be friends with him! Surely I will be able to change.
Be friends with him! Change myself!
And so, I sent the Japanese Magnolias, and visited you at the hospital. I told you before, the floral language for the Japanese Magnolias is friendship.
I was so nervous, and once I handed the flowers to the reception, I ran off.
However, I earnestly prayed that once you got to school, the floral language would come true.

To be friends with you—

The moment I decided that, I felt that everything became bright and cheery.
The future I could not see appeared clearly in front of me.
You would scowl and watch me hold hands with Miss Aoi. You will hear me out impatiently, smiling from time to time, giving a tender look.
I would fall in love with Miss Aoi.
I would introduce you to her as my dearest.
And then, you will have a cheerful girl who likes to smile as a partner, and the 4 of us can go out together.
That dream never happened. On that night when the winds blew, I did something Miss Aoi would scold me for, calling me "Liar", something I cannot refute. Miss Aoi is not the only one however; I too had many people mourn for me.
But you heard my plea for help, and turned your head back
You were willing to be my friend, listen to my one-sided wishes, and granted the flowers in my heart a tender farewell, lending me strength with all your might.
It really is great to have you.
And I can finally say goodbye.
The days where I loved that person, and suffered for it.
With the first tear I ever shed in my life, farewell.

Chapter 7

Michiru slept for two straight days, and due to her family's request, she was transferred to a hospital in Tokyo during this time.
Koremitsu too was arranged by Asai to be warded in the same hospital as Michiru due to the scrapes and cuts all over him, and had a few days of check ups.
"You guys are making too much of a fuss out of this."
Koremitsu muttered bashfully as he saw Aoi, Tsuyako and the other classmates bring in flowers and fruit baskets, only for Koharu to pinch his ear spitefully again.

“Stop giving a patronizing look. How many times must you get hospitalized before you’re happy!? And I thought you calmed down a little.”
Shioriko’s abduction was discovered by Masakaze.
“Grandpa Masakaze is really furious at you, big brother…he said that you hid it from him even though I was in danger…Shiiko kept saying that it wasn’t big brother’s fault, but grandpa wouldn’t listen. He’s flailing his fists in the garden, saying that he’s going to teach you a lesson when you get back…big brother Koremitsu, I think you should be safer if you remain hospitalized for another half year…”
Shioriko lowered her shoulders dejectedly as she peeled the apple into a bunny.
(Well, that is to be expected.)
Koremitsu was already mentally prepared. In any case, he hoped that the elderly Masakaze would not sprain his back while being so amped.
It was during this time that Michiru woke up.

In the morning, Koremitsu, who was discharged earlier, went to visit Michiru along with Honoka. Michiru had her hair let down, glasses put on as she lowered her head blankly. But once she saw Honoka, her face stiffened as she stared at the latter warily.
Honoka too looked tense.
(Hey, what’s going on now?)
The tense atmosphere caused Koremitsu to frown. At this moment, Honoka put the cake into Koremitsu’s hands.
“Hold this.”
And then, she rushed towards Michiru, giving her a slap.
The sharp sound shocked Koremitsu, and he nearly dropped the cake.
“Hey, Shikibu—”
Koremitsu wanted to stop her, but he could not do so as he was holding the cake. In the meantime, Honoka raised her eyebrows, exclaiming,
“When have I ever shown you any pity and thought of you as a foil? I never did!”
Honoka’s voice was so loud, one would worry that the nurses would rush in.
Michiru placed her hand on the cheek Honoka just slapped, and she grimaced unhappily, glaring back at Honoka.
“I was happy to have you as a classmate when we got into High School. The reason why I remained with you is because you’re my friend! You don’t think of that? If you hate me, and you find that it’s unbearable, then it is—”
Michiru suddenly exclaimed,
“Don’t say ‘that is enough’!”
Honoka was taken aback, and went silent.
Michiru scowled, covering her ears with her hands, and shivered like an adolescent child.
“M-mom…just came by, gave me an impatient look and told me ‘that is enough’—mom still has my older sister she can be proud of as a daughter—

someone inferior like me can only be told off ‘that is enough’—”
Michiru eked her voice, painfully venting,

—Lord Hikaru too. When he let go of my hand, he said ‘that is enough’! He said the same thing mom did…!

Koremitsu recalled Michiru saying the exact same words when he jumped into the river to save her.
And just as she did back then, Michiru was shivering and whimpering.
Honoka embraced her, looking to be on the verge of breaking down into tears as well.
She brought her face close to Michiru as the latter covered her ears, saying,
“I won’t say that…we’ll always be friends after all.”
Michiru lowered her hands tentatively, but she continued to weep as she remained wary, putting on a facade as she said,
“I-I hate how you’re always on the heroic side, Hono…”
Honoka too sobbed as she answered,
“Yeah. If you thought so, you could have told me this. I wouldn’t have known otherwise. I’m reckless after all.”
“I might end up stealing Mr Akagi…away from you.”
“I’ll make sure not to let that happen.”
“I-I hate you for being a goody-goody.”
Michiru tugged at Honoka’s clothes firmly.
And the latter embraced the former firmly.
(Looks like things have calmed down…)
Koremitsu heaved a sigh of relief, and turned his eyes to the side.
Hikaru was standing there, beaming with a tender smile as he watched Honoka and Michiru.
Despite bidding Fujino farewell and finishing all his wishes, Hikaru had yet to vanish,
“Will I end up like Princess Kaguya and have someone pick me up? I will have to leave in any case, and I do wish to stay till Christmas.”
Hikaru leisurely noted.
The strands of his hair was dazzling golden as the sunlight shone in through the hospital window.
Perhaps it was because he had no lingering wishes that he looked more dazzling than before, and Koremitsu felt conflicted within, wondering “Is it really alright for a ghost to be dazzling like this?”
At this moment, the rich, sweet voice entered Koremitsu’s ears.
“Miss Hanasato was not satisfied even though my promise with her was fulfilled, and that is because she needed to establish another promise—together with Miss Shikibu’s words. This time, Miss Hanasato will surely be fine.”
Koremitsu silently agreed.
Ah, yeah.

Shikibu's the flower of love guaranteed by Hikaru. She definitely won't let go of your hand.

After embracing Michiru, crying with her, and finishing all her consoling words, Honoka left the hospital along with Koremitsu, and lowered her head, fidgeting.
(Is she embarrassed that I saw her give Hanasato a slap?)
"Well, it's great that you're able to talk with Hanasato."
The moment these words were said, Honoka's face immediately turned beetroot.
"Eh? Ah, yes!"
She stammered, her eyes swimming about before she lifted her head at Koremitsu,
"E-erm,! I did tell Michiru that I'll do my best, but it's a little—no, I'm very nervous about this! But, I-I'll do my best! I'll snatch you back even if you do change your mind, Akagi."
Honoka finished off her words, and gave a feeble look on her face, blushing as she ran off.
"What was that?"
Koremitsu was dumbfounded as he watched the back vanish beyond the street in an instance, accompanied by those nice, long legs.
"Maybe she's worried if you have fallen for Miss Hanasato."
"Not at all."
He grumbled as he strode forth.
(That Shikibu's thinking too much. Or is it that I'm unreliable?)
Just when Koremitsu was frowning, the cellphone in his pocket rang.
It was from Yū. Koremitsu took the phone out.
"Mr Akagi…"
"Hm? What's the matter?"
"You are discharged..today, right?"
"Yeah. Just left the hospital."
"Sorry…that I wasn't able to visit you."
Koremitsu did notice. Aoi, Asai and Kazuaki took turns to visit, but Yū did not send a message, let alone visit him.
However, Koremitsu felt that it would be strange of him to ask Yū "What are you doing". thus, he was hesitant on contacting her.
Yū whispered,
"I will…be headed back to Australia tomorrow. Can you go on a date with me before then?"
That was the promise they made before Shioriko was abducted.
Koremitsu too a deep breath, calming himself.
And then, he gave a serious answer,
"Got it. I'll go wherever you want to meet up."
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Once he got home, Koremitsu was worried that he would be visiting Yū after being beaten by Masakaze with a bamboo sword, and that she would be terrified. Would he have to go on a date with her while in bandages? Luckily for him, all he took was an iron punch to the face.
Koremitsu took a punch from Masakaze, and crashed into the *fusuma* of the living room, and fell along with it into the neighboring room. However, Shioriko grabbed Masakaze's arm, wailing as she pleaded,
"If you continue to punish big brother Koremitsu, Shiiko won't talk to you again, grandpa. Shiiko likes you, so Shiiko will be sad if Shiiko can't talk to grandpa. Please forgive big brother Koremitsu."
Masakaze, who really doted Shioriko, clenched his trembling fists, and after groaning for a while, he muttered, "Humph. You got sent flying from such a weak punch. You're lacking in training. Not enough effort." He turned his back on Koremitsu.
"Thank you, grandpa Masakaze. Love you."
Once Shioriko hugged him, Koremitsu's grandfather blushed.
And then, upon seeing the damaged *fusuma*, Koharu hollered "Why didn't you fall the other side! Of course you have to make sure the doors and windows are open!" She punched Koremitsu on the top of his head, and ordered him to repair the *fusuma*
And again, Shioriko,
"Shiiko is big brother Koremitsu's savior. Big brother has to treasure Shiiko well."
And Koremitsu was forced to make a promise with Shioriko to go to the zoo, aquarium and planetarium.
Shioriko then gave a nonchalant look, which Koremitsu realized that she was shedding crocodile tears, inevitably feeling pity for his grandfather. However, Masakaze made a promise with Shioriko to go to the *Go* club together, and was happy about it, so Koremitsu decided to quietly accept the truth. If not, his grandfather, who was finally cured of his bias against women, would probably end up not trusting them more than before.
In any case, though there was a bruise on his face, Koremitsu decided to go on a date with Yū on that particular day.

And 10 minutes before the appointed time—
The place Yū designated was an indoor tennis court for country club members only.
"I have been to this country club. The requirements to join as a member are very strict."
"You sure this is the place?"
Koremitsu saw the counter that was as posh as a luxury hotel, and murmured in a shocked state.
Member? Entry requirements? This was a foreign concept to the ordinary high school student Koremitsu.
(Yū's family is probably ordinary too. What's going on?)

Koremitsu did not dare approach the counter as he brooded before it.
Hikaru then advised,
“Koremitsu, the security guards are looking at you. The passers-by having been gossiping about you too, so before you get whisked off as a suspicious person, do hurry and register at the counter, or you will be late for your date.”
“Damn it!”
Koremitsu approached the counter, deciding to watch how things played out.
The two ladies at the counter were obviously terrified, but the moment Koremitsu awkwardly stated his name—
“Mr Koremitsu Akagi? Yes, we have a reservation.”
Suddenly, they were being polite. Another staff member even approached him with an overly courteous attitude, saying, “this way please.” and led the way.
“Thank goodness you were not chased out.”
Hikaru gave a wink from the side, and was glared back.
Soon after, Koremitsu arrived at a posh changing room.
“Please change your clothes here.”
The staff member handed him what appeared to be tennis wear and shoes,
(Ack! Do I have to wear these!?)
Koremitsu widened his eyes.
The top was a collared white shirt, while the bottom was shorts.
“Wow! Hurry and wear it, Koremitsu!”
“Like hell I’m wearing it!”
“Eh? Why?”
“It doesn’t match me, right?”
“That is not the case. You will gain quite some attention entering the court with how you are dressed now. You will be embarrassing Yū.”
“Ugh.”
Once Hikaru pointed that out, Koremitsu could only change his clothes. His temples were twitching as he removed the parka and T-shirt.
(Why do I have to wear this?)
Koremitsu wore a white tennis wear, wore a borrowed jumper over it, and sealed it up tight.
“I do feel it is cooler of you to have it a little unzipped.”
Hikaru too changed into tennis wear like Koremitsu did as he chimed in from above. He, wearing tennis wear, looked so suited for it it was infuriating, and he looked 10 times as refreshed as he was before.”
“Shut up. I’ll feel chilly if I open the zip too much.”
Koremitsu impatiently responded, swapped his sneakers for tennis shoes, and went to the court.
The indoor court felt warmth even in Winter, and the air-conditioning was adjusted to a very suitable temperature. However, there was no one other than

Koremitsu to be seen.
“Is this club always lacking in business or something?”
“No. I do suppose that the entire court was booked.”
“What!?”
Koremitsu again widened his eyes.

“Mr Akagi…I kept you waiting.”

The fleeting voice echoed, and upon looking back, he found Yū standing there.
“Woah!”
“!”
Both Hikaru and Koremitsu were greatly taken aback.
Yū was actually in tennis wear.
No. Koremitsu too was in tennis wear, so it was very likely that she was wearing a matching outfit. Koremitsu’s impression of Yū however was that she would wear knee-length skirts, and he never did see her in uniform before, so the impression was set. At this point however—
(A miniskirt?)

The white tennis skirt was reaching midway through the thighs, and the pure white legs reaching out from the skirt were so shockingly slender that Koremitsu was looking there.
It was not the first time he saw a girl's legs, but that Yū actually wore that, giving an unexpected and rare, intrinsic value in itself. This cause Koremitsu to stare at them for quite a while before he recovered.
(Am I a pervert with a foot fetish or something!?)
He gingerly lifted his stare, and found Yū showing a smile on her face.
Her white face was a little beetroot, and though she was nervous, her stare at Koremitsu was neither of disgust nor belittling. One might say that she looked utterly delighted.
The soft, long wavy hair was parted into two tails below the ears. That hairstyle too looked really refreshing and cute, causing Koremitsu's heart to pound.
Hikaru ribbed Koremitsu with his elbow, but of course, the elbow sank into Koremitsu's arm. That however probably meant 'praise her already'. He was giving a vague grin.
Koremitsu averted his eyes, uttering,
"Ah…you're wearing something different from usual. Well…that's a lot."
"Is it strange…?"
Her voice sounded a little worried.
"No, not at all, I guess?"
"Koremitsu, do you not know of any other words to praise you? The last time you went to the pool with Miss Shikibu and the others, you drove them crazy by telling them 'yeah, it's fine'! Using that line more than once is a show of laziness!"
(Shut up! It's rare to find a 10th grade boy like you who can just make up a spiel of sweet talk on the fly!)
Koremitsu bellowed in his heart, but at the same time, he wished for Yū to be as happy as she could be on this day, so he added,
"It's a refreshing feeling…I'll say that it suits you."
For Koremitsu, this was all he could muster. He glanced at Yū, who was beaming away.
"Thank you…"
She softly replied, her voice filled with delight over Koremitsu's praise.
Just when Koremitsu was feeling awkward—
"It does suit you too…Mr Akagi."
"!"
And those words dragged him back into reality.
(Oh, right. I'm wearing the same clothing too!)
Yū's tennis wear was so shocking that Koremitsu forgot about this.
(Yū says that this suits me? No no no, it doesn't suit me at all. Doesn't look like it no matter how I see it.)
Koremitsu understood very well that there are times where kindness would hurt others.

“I-is that so? Thanks.”
He turned to the side, muttering.
“Mr Akagi…can you let me take a photo?”
“Huh?”
Koremitsu turned his head back, exclaiming,
“When I’m dressed like this!?”
“Koremitsu, you cannot be too loud when talking. Yū will be scared.”
After being told off by Hikaru, Koremitsu hushed his voice.
“Y-you can, but can you do so after I’m done changing out of this?”
Yū silently lowered her eyebrows.
“…Mr Akagi…the condition to rent the court…was to take a photo of you in tennis wear…”
“Condition?’
“Mr Kazuaki…”
“Kazuaki booked the court and borrowed these clothes?”
Koremitsu was utterly dumbfounded, and Yū nodded.
“I never did much sports, so I wish…to experience it with you, Mr Akagi…I went to request Mr Kazuaki for help. He was furious…and said I was bold.”
Rather than bold, one would say that Yū was fearless. Speaking of which, Yū did give Kazuaki a verbal lashing at the resort.
Back then, Koremitsu felt moved that Yū had gotten stronger; at this point however, he was speechless. Yū did not seem to have realized how astounding a thing she did as she continued calmly with her fleeting voice,
“However…he gave me a condition to take a photo of you in tennis wear, Mr Akagi…so I accepted it with reluctance…”
Back when Yū was envied and bullied by the girls at school, she was utterly terrified when Honoka came to her apartment along with Koremitsu, worried that she would be bullied again. At this point, even though Kazuaki did all he could to frame Yū, the latter was earnest to him, and Koremitsu could not understand.
Leaving aside how Kazuaki might appear, Koremitsu did not think that Kazuaki, having shown his real personality, was likeable, approachable in any way, though it might be conflicted with what he said about being friends…
Perhaps it was because Kazuaki was Hikaru’s half-brother, and had the same voice. Surely, Hikaru’s existence was so important to.Yū.
“You…do hate taking photos after all, right?”
Yū asked, looking devastated. Her slender fingers were already grabbing the cellphone firmly.
(Ugh, looks like I don’t have a choice.)
Koremitsu did not want Yū to show such a face on this day.
“Don’t show anyone else other than Kazuaki.”
Yū’s eyes immediately sparkled.
“Yes.”
She looked really elated, and began snapping away excitedly.

“Koremitsu, perhaps you can try smiling and not stand there with such a terrifying face, okay? How about a pose with the racket?”
Hikaru gave a bunch of advices from above.
“Will I enter the photo?”
He was holding a racket that appeared in his hands, and bent his back, standing behind Koremitsu, giving a swinging pose.
(Wait, what if this ends up as a photo with a supernatural phenomenon and published in an occult magazine?)
Koremitsu wanted to kick Hikaru aside to shoo him off, but he knew it was meaningless, and could only endure it impatient.
With a scatterbrained, fleeting expression, Yū adjusted her position as she continued to snap photos of Koremitsu.
“Erm…can you…please take a photo with me?”
Yū asked tentatively,
“I won’t show it to anyone else…not even Mr Kazuaki…I’ll treat this…as a treasure for myself.”
Koremitsu gave a serious look back at Yū, and after a while, he answered,
“…Of course.”
Yū smiled, and silently leaned towards Koremitsu.
She then reached her hand out, turning the cellphone camera towards themselves.
Koremitsu’s lips still remained tense as he looked at the phone. Once Yū saw that the photo was taken, she showed the brightest smile on this day.
There was a cold looking Koremitsu on the photo, coupled with Yū showing a sunny smile.
“Thank you.”
Koremitsu’s lips remained stiff as he watched Yū embrace the photo and mutter this.
“Koremitsu, I shall be waiting. Have fun playing.”
Hikaru muttered, and vanished from Koremitsu’s sight.
“Let’s play tennis, Yū. It’s my first time playing, and I don’t know the rules at all, but I think it’s interesting to hit the ball back and forth.”
Koremitsu said, and Yū gave a glowing smile as bright as the sun, answering,
“Yes…I’ll definitely be happy whenever I’m doing something with you, Mr Akagi.”

After holding the racket, running around on the court and hitting the ball to each other, it appeared to Koremitsu that Yū’s proficiency in sports was worse than he thought.
She threw the ball high into the air, but the swing could not match the speed of the falling ball, and it would land by her feet every time. Whenever she threw the ball higher, thinking that it would work, the ball would land 2m away from Yū.

Yū then threw the ball higher, and the ball landed on her ball. She knelt down, and Koremitsu hurriedly ran over from his side of the court.
“Hey! You alright?”
“I-I’m fine.”
Yū put her hand on her head, and shyly answered,
“I-I’ll…hit to your side next time, Mr Akagi.”
She declared that with a determined face, and she tried to stand up, only for her hand to slip, and she fell again.
“Yū!”
“I-I’m fine…I’m fine.”
Koremitsu grabbed her arm to pull her up, and she shyly lowered her head.
He muttered,
“Ah, serving’s unexpectedly hard. I’ll try it this time.”
“O-okay…”
Koremitsu took the ball, and returned to his side.
“I’m hitting it over—!”
He deliberately yelled, and like what Yū did, he threw the ball up with one hand.
And then, he swung the racket down hard when the ball fell.
He felt something!
(Alright!)
Koremitsu yelled in his heart.
However.
“Eh, eh?”
The ball flew by Yū and the baseline, hitting the wall at the back, and finally fell.
“Eh…you see, a serve’s really hard.”
Koremitsu blushed as he said that, and he looked back and forth between Yū
and the racket. Both of them obviously were left at a lost.
“Sorry! I cannot watch this any longer!”
At this moment, Hikaru drifted towards Koremitsu, holding a ball and racket he created, and played the role of a coach.
“It is too hasty for you and Yū to start doing overhead services, Koremitsu. First, get used to the feeling of hitting the ball. Let the ball bounce off the floor once, and swing the racket as though you are scooping it out. Do it like this. Bend your waist down.”
Hikaru probably was used to tutoring girls. Koremitsu did as Hikaru said, and let the ball bounce off the floor once before hitting it. The ball then landed in Yū’s court, and bounced up.
“You’re amazing, Mr Akagi.”
“So-sorta.”
Both their faces brightened.
“Hm, your sports proficiency is good after all, Koremitsu. You just need to

practise a bit to get the hang of things. Now, try aiming at the area in front of Yū. Swing it like this, and tilt the racket to this angle. Also, make it slower so that Yū has an easier time hitting the ball back."
Koremitsu glanced aside at Hikaru as the latter explained and personally demonstrated. He let the ball bounce on the floor, and hit it towards Yū's court.
The ball was hit a little awry, but Yū raised her racket to hit the ball courageously.
It appeared Yū wanted to hit the ball before it landed, but she missed, and was dejected as a result.
Hikaru advised her,
"Do not mind about that, Yū. Try waiting for the ball to bounce off the court before hitting it."
"Hey, I guess it's easier to hit the ball after it bounces off the floor. Try again and go for it!"
"Y-yes."
Yū too gave an adamant nod.
Hikaru again demonstrated, and Koremitsu followed suit. The ball glided through the air with a gentler arc, and landed in front of Yū.
Yū stared at the ball intently, waited for it to land, and cautiously swung her racket.
The ball passed the net weakly, gently landing on Koremitsu's court.
"You did it, Yū!"
"Mr Akagi!"
"Congrats!"
The trio ran towards the net, appearing as though they just won the Wimbledon, their faces showing delight.
"Okay! Now try hitting a rally to each other! Try hitting at least 5 times."
"We're hitting a rally now."
"Yes."
Both of them ran to their sides of the court, and started hitting.
Yū kept missing at first, and even though she would hit, the ball would not pass the net, so they could not continue the rally. As Hikaru was an outstanding coach however, the two of them could maintain their rallies. Once there was some improvement, they felt elated.
"Okay! 7 times next! And after that, 10 times!"
They slowly aimed for their target, and finally, had a rally of 16 hits.
Koremitsu would hit his shots lighter for Yū to hit back, but it was interesting trying to control his power. Whenever Yū swung her racket hard, he felt happy.
Yū too was the same; whenever her racket hit the ball towards Koremitsu successfully, and when the latter desperately ran for the ball, her eyes sparkled.
Hikaru vanished midway through this, and by the time they realized, it was noon.

“This is the first time I went through such an intensive exercise.”
Yū cheerfully noted as she let out a lot of sweat.
“I made a lunch box. Mr Akagi, please have some.”
“Oh, I’m feeling hungry now.”
Yū cheerfully took out a multi-layered lunchbox, and it was filled with Nori riceballs.
“I do think…sandwiches are cute…but I think you would prefer…riceballs, Mr Akagi…so I made many flavors out of them.”
With a smile on her face, she handed the riceballs to Koremitsu.
“Yeah, I do prefer riceballs.”
“I’m glad.”
Koremitsu grabbed a riceball Yū made, and it was filled with a large, flavorful piece of fried chicken.
“It’s really good.”
Once Koremitsu said this, Yū’s lips showed a smile, her face blushing.
Besides fried chicken, there were salmon, meat-potato, hamburger fillet fillings, and other rich assorted flavors. As Yū was looking delighted, Koremitsu ate 5 of them, and felt that his belly was about to be busted.
They played tennis again to help each other digest, and after that, due to Yū’s request, they went to an arcade.
Koremitsu had never made a friend before, and thus, he never stepped into such a place. All the games were a new experience for him.
He played a fighting game with Yū, lost himself with the crane game, and because Yū said,
“Mr Akagi…that one…looks interesting…”
They went to the photo booth.
In the bustling Southern country-themed booth with coconuts and dolphins drawn on it, Koremitsu’s scowling face was shown. He was so nervous that his face was frozen, and he tried to force himself to smile, only for his face to look scarier.
Yū too was a little surprised, beaming, her smile looking happier than usual. She gave an earnest smile, holding the seal in the photo booth and the dolphin toy she obtained from the keychain in front of her chest.
“The treasures…have increased.”
Suddenly, Koremitsu felt his heart ache.
The time for Yū’s flight back to Australia approached, and there was still some time till sunset, so they went their separate ways in front of the station.
There were several pedestrians moving past Koremitsu, and it was really noisy, with the vehicles rushing through and the people chatting away.
Yū looked up at Koremitsu with her fleeting eyes, muttering her earnest wishes,
“Thank you for today. I did many things I didn’t think I could do before… I’m…really happy. Mr Akagi…will you go on a date with me again?”

“No, this is the last time. I got a woman I like, so I can’t date any other women.”
With a serious look, Koremitsu blurted this to Yū.
A smile quietly surfaced on Yū’s face.
The noise overlapped with this silence. Soon after, Yū calmly said,
“It is Miss Shikibu, isn’t it?”
“Yeah.”
“When I…paid a visit to Miss Shikibu…I had a wager with her, whether I can earn your heart back through this date, Mr Akagi…she must be feeling worried now.”
Koremitsu recalled the uneasiness Honoka showed when they went on their separate ways, and inadvertently frowned.
(—Seriously, that girl.)
The surrounding was noisy, but it seemed there was a silent space emptied here at the place both Koremitsu and Yū stood.)
Then, Yū gave a forlorn look, saying,
“When I met Miss Shikibu at your house…I had a feeling that you would be with her…the one you really love is definitely…a girl like Miss Shikibu…”
On the day Yū went to Koremitsu’s house…
Once Koremitsu got home, he found Asai and the others gathered in his room, and he was feeling panicky.
At that moment, what expression did Honoka show?
Koremitsu felt that she was peeking at Yū nervously.
When he sent Yū back, Koremitsu told her that those were the precious flowers to Hikaru.)
Amongst them, Honoka was the only one unrelated to Hikaru, and she was the one girl Koremitsu approached, the girl who fell in love with him.

—…Shikibu’s my classmate, a good person…Hikaru once said that she’s like a Heliotrope.

In response to Koremitsu’s words,

She’s definitely a cheerful, determined…wonderful person, no?

Yū muttered those words.
“You’re very kind, Mr Akagi…so you can’t leave any girl weaker than you alone…you helped me too…but if I wasn’t that weak…you definitely wouldn’t be concerned about me, and you would not have thought that you were in love with me…that is what I think. If I really wanted to have you, Mr Akagi, I shouldn’t have left that apartment. You would be with me forever if that happened…”
Yū’s soothing voice dragged Koremitsu back into the cramped room that was akin to the bottom of the sea, filled with a mysterious hill of trash, and sealed windows.

During the peaceful, agonizing time he spent with the weak and feeble girl with the fleeting eyes…Koremitsu felt a sweet and sour throbbing, and he was feeling angsty back then.
“But even though you loved my old, weak self who wasn’t willing to leave my house, that was different. I wish that you choose me now that I’ve become stronger…”
“That wasn’t just a feeling.”
Yū widened her eyes.
“I did fall in love with you, Yū. You;’ll always be my first love.”
Koremitsu told her firmly.
He stared at the startled Yū.
For Koremitsu, the time he spent in the little world Yū locked herself in was filled with first-time experiences, sweetness, angst and pain.
It was an irreplaceable time.
Yū slowly raised her lips, showing a fleeting smile.
“My first love shall always be you, Mr Akagi.”
Then, with a cheerful face, she said,
“Goodbye.”
Her slender back turned towards Koremitsu, and she quickly entered the crowd, her flowing long hair swaying in the air.
She walked on fearlessly with her own legs.
The love Koremitsu had with Yū definitely ended at the moment they held hands in the rain and saw all kinds of flowers in the park.
Hikaru once said that Koremitsu would lose Yū if he was to let her outside.
Once she stepped outside, Yū would not be simply a dream created by any man.
Surely, she would sprout and bloom new flowers. Her serene grace would contain grit, always blooming proudly.
Koremitsu’s heart ached as he watched Yū vanish into the passing crowd.
And then, he let out a long sigh, scowling.
Alright, now what do I do with this reckless love rookie who doesn’t know what’s going on?”
Koremitsu squirmed, and whispered to the friend who should be right behind him,
“Hikaru, lend me your knowledge.”
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(I guess Akagi went back to Miss Kanai after all)
Honoka was restless since the morning. One moment, she would be staring at her phone in front of the table. The next moment, she would be hugging her pillow on the bed, and then she would stand up and wander aimlessly around the room.
On that morning, she received a message from Yū,

“I’ll be having a date with Mr Akagi now.”

Honoka felt her heart wince. This day finally came.
While Honoka was hospitalized, Yū came to visit her, and she said with a fleeting face,

—I made a promise with Mr Akagi to go on a date. If Mr Akagi changes his mind and falls for me…can I go out with him?

Yū's tone and expression were calm and delicate, but Honoka was overwhelmed by her, as she had never conversed with Yū before, and the latter asked her for permission. Honoka answered,

If Akagi really falls for you, it's not an issue of whether I allow it or not. If that happens, I can't do anything about it.

Honoka tried her best to remain calm, but her mind was in complete chaos. If she was to meet Koremitsu at that point, surely she would flustered and tell him, "Don't go on that date with Miss Kanai! Didn't you say you like me?"
That was why Honoka scampered back home once she got discharged, without waiting for her family members to pick her up.
Yū said that she would message or call Honoka with regards to the outcome.
After that, Shioriko was abducted, and it was not the moment for that. Shioriko returned safe and sound however, and Koremitsu was discharged after he was hospitalized for checkups.

—I will be returning back soon. Do you still remember that date?

Two days ago, Honoka received a call from Yū.

—O-o-o-o-of course I do. You can choose a time you want to date Akagi, Miss Kanai.

Honoka answered shrilly.
"I'm really an idiot! I shouldn't have made such a promise with her. Akagi would have fallen for Miss Kanai again. She's so slim, delicate and feminine, so anyone will have the urge to protect her. She's right in Akagi's sweet spot!"
Honoka collapsed onto the bed, hugged her pillow, and rolled about.
He does like that Miss Kanai that much after all
Koremitsu returned home with Yū on the day everyone went to his house, and he sent Yū back alone. The atmosphere between them was very good.
"Got to believe in Akagi. The date's because Akagi goes by his word. This will definitely be the last time—ahhhh!!! I never dated Akagi before!"

Despite Honoka's unforgettable memory of the two of them sneaking into the school pool in the middle of the night, that did not seem to fit the atmosphere of a normal date.
"If we're to break up without even dating, auu~, I should have known this would happen. I should have dated Akagi earlier."
Honoka again rolled about on the bed, her eyeballs rolling with tears welling from them. She hugged the pillow and muttered for a while, and then—
"Their date should be done by now, right? I don't know what will happen. Shall I call Miss Kanai or Akagi to confirm…? I can't do it!"
She sat upright, and shook her head hard. It was too terrifying for her to do so.
"Go-got to update my blog…"
The "Purple Princess's Mansion'.was a blog for Honoka to publish her cellphone novels, but the comments column was where girls would share their love troubles.
There was a period when Honoka was called the 'love expert', and she got giddy as a result. A few days ago however, she admitted on her blog that she never dated a boy before, and she had an unrequited crush on a boy. She was already mentally prepared to receive a backlash from her viewers for lying to her, that there would be a lot of protesting messages. In fact, Honoka did have them, but there was an overwhelming number of messages 'Knowing that you have an unrequited crush just like us and is worrying about love makes you more approachable, Purple Princess. Let's work hard for our romances to succeed. please continue to hear our troubles'. The number of clicks sharply increased, and there were more love inquiries as compared to before.
Honoka opened her blog, and scanned through the comments, readying herself to answer.

"To the Love expert, Princess Princess.
This is my first time leaving a comment here. Right now, I'm feeling troubled because of love, so I decided to discuss this with you.
I recently confessed to someone I like.
That person's my classmate, the one seated next to me.
That person has scary eyes, a poor attitude, is always staring at the phone, and she has a tendency to kick, always ready to raise her leg to kick. At first, I thought that person was really unbelievable.
But when I was in trouble. That person was always listening to my troubles earnestly, helping me.
That person worries about others more than being selfish about it, a really good person who'll always help others.
I'm starting to understand that person's good points more and more now, and I think I do like that person, but that's just a like as a classmate.

But once that person confessed to me, I started to be more aware about that person.”

For some reason, this clearly resembled her relationship with Koremitsu.

“I was kissed by someone else, and that person saw me. She scolded me, calling me an idiot, and slammed at my chest. My heart was pounding like crazy.”

Honoka gasped.
“No way.”

“That person once booked a karaoke box, and suddenly started reading a swimsuit gravure magazine with me inside. We even had a commotion at the pool, and my pants slipped as a result. There was once when I got back, and saw that person welcoming me with a floral-patterned apron.”

“No way…”
Honoka’s heart jumped, her cheeks searing.
“It’s basically…”

“That person assumed that I made someone pregnant, and baked calcium-rich cookies for me. Once that person’s friend confessed to me, that person then said to keep the distance from me.”

“Isn’t that person referring to me now?”

“I don’t know when exactly did I start to have feelings for that reckless, crass person, feelings beyond that of a classmate.”

“That person was in danger because of me, and nearly died as a result.
That was when I realized that I love that person, not like as a classmate.
It’s because that person is that person that I like that person.”

Honoka’s heart raced, and the face staring at the screen got increasingly scalding, her fingers unable to stop as she rolled the mouse.

“I clearly told that person that I like her. That person however isn’t just reckless, she’s a blockhead. She’s unlike the Purple Princess, an utterly hopeless rookie at love. Right now, she’s still worrying if I’ll move on to another person.”

“I-isn’t it you whose actions are weird…you’re the stupid one? What’s with that ‘rookie at love’ anyway?”

“What do I do to convince that bipolar, reckless, foolhardy, incorrigible love idiot of my feelings? Please answer me.”

The message was signed off with the ID ‘red hound’.
Honoka did not know whether she should be angry, embarrassed, or swirling around on her swivel chair. In her confusion, her cellphone rang, indicating a message,
It was Koremitsu!
Koremitsu sent a message!
Honoka hastily opened a message, and the topic was ‘love consultation’.
Attached to it was Honoka’s blog address,
“Come to the riverside for the reply”.
That was the text attached.
Honoka got into action faster than she could think.
She got up from her chair, grabbed her cellphone and the travel pass, and dashed out of her house.
The sky was dyed orange by the sunset, and the clouds was beginning to have a pink hue on them. Honoka raced down the road under the setting sun, her heart ripping apart. She went through the gantry, darted into the carriage, and was puffing away as she tapped away at the message,

“To Red Hound,
Is there anything else you’ll like to say? All I remember is that strange matter of booking the karaoke room to read the gravure magazines!”

After a stop, the reply came.

“I do.
If you want to hear it. Come with your reply.”

Honoka then texted back,

“You idiot. I’m on my way.”

Another station later, and the other party replied,

“Don’t run away, you love rookie.”

“Which one of us is it?”

Honoka texted back, and once she arrived at the train station closest to school, she started running away.
While the orange sun continued to set, Honoka continued to wheeze as she dashed down the riverside that was dyed red, turning her head around to look for the sender.
The water and grass were dyed a burning red, and the cool breeze rustled the silver grass by the riverbank. Standing there was a boy holding a cellphone, with a head of messy red hair—like a red dog.
Koremitsu looked up and stared at Honoka with his sharp eyes.
Honoka, utterly delirious, got ready to run down to the riverbank,
“You idiot! It’s dangerous!”
And Koremitsu ran over.
The grass by the river caused Honoka to slip and fall on her butt, and she slid down with amazing force.
Honoka inched towards Koremitsu.
Koremtisu scowled as he ran towards her, reaching his arms out to embrace her, and they tumbled around a few times on the grass.
On the silent grassland, the only thing they could hear was their erratic breathing. They felt each other’s breathing on their faces.
Honoka looked down, and found Koremitsu’s face right in front of her.
His lips curled, Koremitsu stared back at Honoka seriously.
He, who nearly drowned in the stormy night, woke up in this position the following morning, and at this moment, it was more embarrassing. His hands were on Honoka’s waist and back, and their legs were intertwined.
Neither of them knew who brought their faces closer in, Koremitsu, or Honoka.
Honoka felt her heart breaking apart, and her cheeks were flushed red, tears welled in her eyes and she gently placed her lips on Koremitsu’s.

At the same time, she muttered in her heart.
(Akagi, this is my ‘answer’)
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“Thank you for sending me off, upperclassman Tōjō..”
“Not at all. You did not notify Akagi?”
It was the airport hall, and Yū was conversing with Tōjō.
“I bade Mr Akagi farewell before I got here.”
He probably was off to visit Honoka.
(Miss Shikibu…I suppose you do not have to report the result to me. I lost the bet. Mr Akagi did not falter. He told me that he likes you…)
She should have been mentally prepared, but her heart ached so much.
“Upperclassman Tōjō…which me do you think is more charming…the old me…or the current me?”
“Wha—th-that is…”
Tōjō was speechless, appearing to be at a loss.
Shungo Tōjō had once told Koremitsu that he preferred the old Yū. To protect her, he arranged for a female bodyguard to live in the apartment beside Yū, and even made sure Yū was not expelled due to a lack of attendance by
pulling some strings.
And that Tōjō was unable to answer Yū’s question.

(I suppose…upperclassman Tōjō…finds my old, tender self more attractive after all…)
Just when Yū began to feel downhearted about this,

“Is this even a question? The current Yū is a thousand times better!”

Kazuaki stormed in with a huff. With the rich, sweet voice of Hikaru’s, he rattled on,
“The old Yū was a shut-in and so gloomy, I can tell that she is a slut who puts up the facade of a weak virgin that sleeps around with other men; it is to be expected that she is abused by her fellow females. The current Yū is natural and bold, and though infuriating, I do not have to worry about your feelings all the time. I do find you much better than before.”
“…Mr Kazuaki, didn’t you tell me over the phone ‘How can I possibly send you off’…”
Yū was dumbfounded that Kazuaki suddenly appeared at the airport, and she softly inquired. The latter then raised his eyebrows,
“I did not come to send you off. I came to grumble at you! What happened to the photos of Mr Akagi wearing his tennis outfit? Just standing there? A jumper on his upper body? What in the world? An elementary school kid can take better shots than you. An-anyway. the ones that say that old Yū is better are those that can only accept their fates as virgins forever.”
Kazuaki concluded, not realizing that he too belonged to that group. Tōjō in turn looked utterly devastated.
Surely, this was an encouragement for Yū who was rejected…though he would say so, Kazuaki would probably lash back with ten times the furor.
Thanks to Kazuaki, Yū felt a warm feeling in her heart, and smiled,
“Yes. I do prefer my current self.”
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“Hey…brother. I can understand how you feel now, but we should be going home now, right?”
Yū got onto the plane, and Kazuaki left, leaving Hiina to call out to Shungo, now crouched on the airport hall.
Shungo had reminded her over and over again not to call him brother with others around, but he had no strength to even rebuke her,
“I-I did not segregate women…by whether they are virgins or not…I just wish for women to be cautious and not be promiscuous…uuu, my pride as a man lost to Kazuaki.”
Hiina too knelt down, patting Shungo on his shoulder.
“You haven’t lost, brother. You’re cooler than anyone else.”
She chirped, and with a matured, tender voice, she spoke,
“If you like virgins, I shall remain a virgin forever, big brother.”

Chapter 8

It has been a month since Yū returned home.

Hikaru continued to remain with Koremitsu, leisurely dousing the latter with floral language.
For example, In the pure white color of Winter, the passionate red decorates it after all, or the sight of the Camellia fluttering really is riveting', 'do you know the 10 graces of the Camellia', 'the red color of the Nandina is wondering, but the bell-like red fruits hanging on the fiery, thick branches really make this a hard decision for me', 'The Winterberry is as adorable as a girl's little lips, and I really cannot help but kiss it'..
Is this guy intending to haunt me for the rest of my life' Koremitsu began to worry.
Due to that, he never did kiss Honoka ever since that moment at the riverbank.
They were officially dating, but there was no way they could become passionate lovers so suddenly.
However, whenever they were headed home together after school, or alone in the Japanese Dance clubroom, or out together during the holidays, or whenever they were to bid farewell, Honoka would shyly lift her head at Koremitsu, fidgeting, looking as though she had something to say. This would be the moment when Koremitsu would be worried about Hikaru, and play dumb, averting the topic by saying 'Ahh, I'm hungry'. 'I just saw a fly. There're flies in winter?'.
Koremitsu knew that Honoka was frustrated because of his attitude, and in some sense, he too was feeling angsty.
Also, there has been lots of 'such an atmosphere' brewing recently, and this further tormented Koremitsu to no end.
(Speaking of which, did that Shikibu became so sexy looking out of a sudden…she would hold my hand when we're going home together, blushing hard. She'll peek at me from time to time when we're in class, and that's making me tense. The way she puffs her cheeks and look up at me causes my heart and head to heat up. Back then, I just wondered whether she wants to use the toilet whenever she was blushing and fidgeting. Now I'm having trouble holding it in.)
Once he realized his feelings for Honoka and began dating her, Koremitsu found that those legs were long and pretty, her light brown hair silky, and nice to touch, her lips looking tender and glossy, and he was getting jumpy. He had the feeling that they could take a further step.
I might as well ignore Hikaru.
No, I don't have any interest in exhibitionist play.
And with Hikaru being his brake, Koremitsu was able to hold in his feelings for Honoka. Without Hikaru around, he had the feeling that it would not be just a little development, and that would be a problem too—
He was seated on the tatami with his legs folded, looking glum. Hikaru floated to Koremitsu's side asking with a dazzling face,
"This is the first time that I am spending Christmas with a friend. Do you celebrate it every year with your family, Koremitsu?"

“We’re Buddhists, so we don’t really celebrate Christmas.”
“Eh, that is a rarity. But what about this year? We do need to get Shiiko a Santa Claus.”
“Uu…I guess.”
It would be too cruel to tell the 4th grader Shioriko *we won’t have Santa visiting us’*. Surely his grandpa, who dotes on Shioriko so much, would be willing to cosplay as Santa for her sake.
“Got to make this Christmas a pleasant one though. The living room has to be decorated. Ah, you have to prepare the Christmas Tree too. Order a cake, and get Miss Koharu to bake a stuffed turkey. And get a Christmas ring on the corridor too.”
Upon seeing Hikaru come up with Christmas plans with a grin, Koremitsu lamented, *He’s getting so excited while ignoring how busy I’ll be* However, he got up,
“Wait, I’ll take notes.”
That was because the words Hikaru confessed before lingered in his heart,

—At that moment, will someone be welcoming me like what happened to Princess Kaguya? I will have to leave in any case, so I do wish to stay till Christmas.

Once Christmas passed, would Hikaru really vanish from this Earth? Would this end up being the first Christmas they spent together—and the last? Koremitsu had such a feeling, so he followed Hikaru’s wishes to spend a wonderful Christmas together.

And so, it was a morning, a week before Christmas Day, when Mikoto notified Koremitsu that Fujino gave birth.
The labor process was long and arduous.
The one born was a boy, named Kaoru.
That was the name Hikaru thought for his child during the commotion involving Sora—one had to wonder if it was a coincidence, or that Hikaru mentioned to Fujino or his father to name his child as Kaoru.
But when Mikoto mentioned the name, Hikaru seemed to be overwhelmed by some emotions, narrowing his eyes sadly as he raised his lips, showing an elated smile.
At this moment, he smiled silently, staring at the photos Mikoto took with her cellphone, the photos of Fujino smiling amicably, cradling her baby.

The DNA test results proved that the child was not Hikaru’s.

Mikoto noted with a stoic tone, devoid of any emotion, stating that It was undoubtedly the child of Hikaru’s father.

Hikaru did not leave anything behind on this world.

But those ethereal, precious things would surely live on in the ones Hikaru loved, and the ones who loved Hikaru.
Hikaru will continue to live on within Fujino.
But one would hope that it was not a curse, but a blessing.
Fujino's face was tender as she cradled the baby. It was the same as when she was beaming with Hikaru under the Wisteria flowers, back when she was still a young girl, a satiated, blissful face.
One would hope for it to continue living.
And also, hope that she would use those warmth, adorable memories to reminisce Hikaru.
"Hey, Ono, you don't have say it now, but can you tell me about the story of Fujino and Hikaru that you know of one of these days?"
He asked, and with those refreshing eyes of hers, Mikoto stared right at Koremitsu,
"Sorry, I refuse."
She answered.
"Miss Fujino only told me of her secret...when I was little, she enthusiastically told me 'I finally met Hikaru today'. That was the start of it all, and after that, she would tell me all the stories of her with Hikaru, including all her sins. Those are important presents to me. They were startling, heavy, filled with anguish, yet filled with glitter—they are like gemstones to me, leaving me frenetic. I intend to keep them within me forever."
Mikoto raised her hands to her chest.
"I see."
Koremitsu sounded relived as he muttered.
What kind of stories did Fujino tell Mikoto?
When did she begin to realize her love for Hikaru, tormented herself, and yet continued to love him?
What sort of feelings did she have when she married Hikaru's father?
Surely she would have suffered and despaired. Surely she would have envied and betrayed.
But surely, those were sparkling, gemstone-like stories to Mikoto, who concluded with the wise-looking eyes.
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A few days later, Koremitsu received Aoi's confession on the school rooftop during lunch break.
"I should have chosen the season better."
Aoi was wearing a uniform, not even a coat or a scarf as she cuddled herself, shivering as she waited for Koremitsu.
The sky was exceptionally clear, and though the air remained stagnant, it was frosty. Aoi's lips began to purple, her face slightly reddened. Koremitsu

got up here once his lessons ended, but one had to wonder how long Aoi waited.
“Do you want to talk inside?”
The moment Koremitsu asked, “No, we can do so here.” Aoi looked on stubbornly, saying,
“I decided to come to the roof a month back.”
She noted adamantly.
Then, she lowered her hands, and straightened her back, lifting her large black eyes at Koremitsu, saying,

“I like you, Mr Akagi. Please go out with me.”

Koremitsu lowered his head.
“Sorry. I got a girlfriend.”
Two seconds later,
“I understand.”
Aoi answered calmly.
“Thank you for giving me a clear answer.”
She too lowered her head as Koremitsu did, and lowered eye eyes, looking a little distraught, saying,
“…Mr Akagi, assuming that I was not Hikaru’s fiancee, would you be willing to have me be your girlfriend?”
“I got Shikibu now, so no. And if you weren’t Hikaru’s fiancee, I suppose we won’t be talking like this.”
“I guess. There will not be a chance after all.”
Aoi’s face showed a clear smile.
“It really is wonderful that Hikaru has you as his friend, Mr Akagi. I know of Hikaru’s feelings thanks to you, and that I can still continue to fall in love again. I am rejected, but from now on, I still love you, just as I did for Hikaru. I will continue to love you, and I will love the one who recreate these feelings in me.”
The clear, sparkling eyes filled Koremitsu’s heart.
Hikaru, watching the duo from the side, must be feeling the same thing as well.
He was probably beaming away, watching Aoi being so energetic.
It was Aoi who taught Koremitsu that girls are cute creatures. Aoi would greet him bashfully whenever they met on the corridor, looking gaudy. It was Aoi who held his hand when he met his mother, was left at a loss, and shed tears. Back then, he once embraced Aoi on the roof when the latter acted out of impulse.
Aoi really was the good girl whom Hikaru said would be too good for him, a cute girl, a pure white Hollyhock blooming in the Sacred lands, a demure girl that would soothe others. Thus, one day, she would surely find the most wonderful love for herself.
“Yeah, do your best.”

Aoi mustered the most brilliant smile she could, and answered Koremitsu's cheer,
"Leave it to me!"
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(I was dumped…)
After Koremitsu left, Aoi stared into the sky for quite a while, and forgot how cold she was.
The blue, cloudless sky became hazy, and a trail of tears trickled down both sides of Aoi's faces.
(I do know that Mr Akagi is different from Hikaru. Once he chose a woman, he will not philander on anyone other than that woman.)
Thus, while Aoi felt really depressed, it was wonderful that she was able to continue moving forward.
She wiped her tears away, voicing out to the one behind the door Koremitsu stepped through.
"I know you are there, Asa."
The door that was slightly ajar swung open, and Asai, wearing a coat, scowled as she walked out.
"I brought a coat for you."
Asai coldly noted, putting the coat in her hand on Aoi's shoulder.
A warm, fuzzy feeling engulfed Aoi's icy body, and she tugged at the coat—
"Haha, it feels warm."
She beamed,
"Asa, my romance failed."
"…"
"I do feel relieved now though. How about you confess to Mr Akagi too, Asa?"
Asai, standing silently beside Aoi, widened her eyes immediately, and immediately frowned, scowling.
"I will not act impulsively based on love. Besides, there is no use loving a man with a girlfriend."
Asai seemed to indicate that she had no reason why Aoi would mention the name Koremitsu Akagi, and she snorted with disdain, turning her head away.
Upon seeing Asai act this way, Aoi snuck her neck into the warm coat, looking a little blissful as she beamed.
"You really are a tough one to deal with, huh? I will comfort you when you are rejected in your love though, Asa."
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(I'm definitely spending Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with big brother Koremitsu this year. I won't let him be alone with Miss Shikibu!)
Shioriko made up her mind as she tied the children boots and socks on the Akagis' corridor.

Once she knew that Koremitsu was dating Honoka, Shioriko was so shocked that she could not swallow the Baumkuchen that was her tea.
Koremitsu never did view Honoka as one of the opposite gender, so when did they have such a relationship going on?
And from the moment they first began dating Koremitsu would anxiously pull out his phone to check anxiously. Whenever Shioriko mentioned Honoka's name, he would blush.
What is going on!? Why is he so lovestruck for Miss Shikibu!? Shioriko was very displeased as a result.
And even when she voiced her complaints to the chameleon that took Lapis' role, the chameleon merely stuck its tongue out with a stoic face, further incensing Shioriko.
(I won't lose! The match begins now! In another 4 years, I'll be a beauty even Miss Shikibu isn't a match for.)
In any case, she was headed to Tôjô's place. She wanted to embrace the cute kittens Lapis gave birth to and heal her soul.
The hatred Shioriko had for Tôjô snatching Lapis had yet to vanish.
But whenever Shioriko went to look for Lapis and the kittens, Tôjô would line up a batch of animal cookies he personally baked, doused with an assortment of butter pancakes, and apple pies with homemade ice cream dabbed on them, trying to appease Shioriko.
Shioriko never was ensnared by the sweets, but she started to have a feeling that Tôjô was not as bad as she first thought. Once she finished all the sweets he made, his handsome face would relax slightly, looking very delighted.
(He may be a lolicon. I will eat the sweets, but I got to make sure not to let my guard down. I got big brother Koremitsu.)
She tied her shoelaces, and got out from the house. Once she stood right the doors, her eyes met a boy's who was of her age.
(Ah! He's!)
It was the boy who came to spy on the Akagis, and was chased away by Shioriko with a broom. Back then, Koharu came out to say 'stop it, Shiiko', and the boy scampered away.
Koharu said that she did not know the boy, but looking at her response and her stammer when she spoke to Koremitsu and Masakaze, the sharp-witted Shioriko realized it.
This boy was Koharu's son.
It was said that he was still a baby when Koharu divorced. He was taken by the paternal family, and Koharu never did meet him.
(But aunt Koharu definitely wants to meet him. I can tell from her expression.)
Koharu was very languid after that incident. Surely she was thinking of the boy.
The boy probably assumed that he would be whacked by Shioriko with the broom again, and he stared at her warily, backing away little by little.

Shioriko too stared at him intently, pointing her thumb to the door, and stated coldly,
“…Come in.”
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◇ ◇
“It’s almost time for Christmas Eve. Big Brother, who are you having it with?”
Shioriko sent a message stating that she could not making, so Shungo was having tea together at the fireplace. He was giving a call to Hiina, asking if she was available, and the latter responded by saying to meet at the fireplace.
Hiina got there first, saying, “Bogged down by the family, huh?’. She deliberately changed her mannerism to disguise her birthplace and accent, but at this moment, she reverted back to her usual mannerism.
Shungo showed no intention of blaming her.
“I do not have any plans for Christmas Eve.”
He answered formally, maintaining his poised tone as he laid out a piece of paper on the table, and turned to Hiina.
“I wanted to find a chance to give this to you. Since I have the time now, I wish to end this quickly for you.”
Hiina’s face looked a little glum; perhaps she had assumed it to be cash. However, a look of surprise slowly spread on her face, and the tears in the eyes continued to twirl.
Her hands were holding onto the piece of paper, and she reread the contents over and over again, her fingers and shoulders quivered, her face gradually contorted, before she finally burst into tears.
“Brother…this is, a copy of the family registration, right…? It has my name on it. Am I recognized now? Did you request for it, brother?”
“…”
A lot of realization and tactical planning was required of Shungo when he requested for Hiina to be officially recognized, knowing that his father thought of him as a hapless lad. After lots of arduous negotiations, his father finally recognized Hiina as his own daughter, and he finally felt somewhat vindicated, his entire body quivering.
“You may not reveal to the public that you are a daughter of the Tôjôs…but I shall do my best to help you out.”
“It is okay. This is fine enough for me. I am as happy as when you got me out from Shiga, big brother.”

—Are you my big brother? I have a family?
Hiina widened her eyes and stared at Shungo when they first met at an orphanage in rural Shiga, and beamed.
I am elated.
Truly, it is a wonderful thing to be born into this world.
I will do anything for the sake of my family.

While he recognized Hiina, it was not merely just out of pity of this little sister without a given name; Hiina could not call Shungo ‘big brother’ in front of everyone else.
But for Hiina, she was utterly elated, and Shungo too thought of her as a family member with the same blood flowing in him.
“Do you have any plans for Christmas Eve, Hiina?”
It was the first time Shungo called his little sister ‘Hiina’ .
Hiina’s face grew increasingly contorted.
“No.”
She sobbed.
“Then, let us spend the day together. Christmas is supposed to be spent with family.”
Hiina’s lips were quivering, perhaps unable to say anything, and she nodded over and over again.
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3 days before Christmas, it was the closing ceremony.
Michiru was discharged from the hospital, tampering both her genial voice and spiteful tongue as she conveyed her intents to her classroom, and as the class representative, she trained them well.
She would bicker with Honoka from time to time, but they were on good terms. The next day was the 23rd, and they intended to play at a theme park until their legs jellied.
“I have a date with you on the Eve…Akagi, so I spared some time.”
Honoka shyly explained, and reached her hand out to hold Koremitsu’s causing the latter’s heart to pound, his face red.

Tsuyako had been performing overseas all year long. The media had been paying much attention to her.
“I will continue to work hard to show everyone the red weeping cherry blossom of Japan that is highly regarded.”
She cheerfully declared.
Her alluring, riveting dance were as graceful as the red flower petals swaying, and surely, it could allur all the people of the world.

The closing ceremony ended, and Koremitsu was on the way home.
“Mr Akagi! Will you like a ride?”
A handsome bespectacled youth got out from the driver seat of a small blue car, beaming.
“:Ack, Kazuaki.”
“There is no need to be courteous. How about a trip around? Or to the airport so that we can head off to my family resort in Hawaii and enjoy the winter break? Maybe a curise touring the Mediterranean Sea?”
“No, that’s too kind of you. My family’s tradition is that we’re to spend Christmas Eve and Day together.”

In Kazuaki's case, it would be terrifying if Koremitsu was to get on the car with him and actually get deported overseas.
"Is that so? That is a pity~"
Kazuaki frowned a little, and shut off his car engine.
"Well then, let us have a conversation about my mother…"
He parked the car by the side, and approached Koremitsu, speaking of the ex-wife of Hikaru's father, Hiroka.
"Mother was not that kind of a fiery person from the moment she was born. She may appear this way, but when she was young, she would write on pink slips 'I love you, I hope that we will hurry and grow up so that I can marry you', and personally went to the door of her first love to deliver the letter in the postbox; that was really cute of her. That person she first loved however never did choose Mother, but another woman."
"Wait…is that Hikaru's…"
"Yes. Mother's first love was father, and yet the latter was so devoted to Hikaru's mother. It was because of family reasons that Mother was able to be the main wife, but father kept clinging onto Hikaru's mother, loving her so much, and even bore a child. Because of that, Mother was envious, and went insane."
Koremitsu recalled meeting Hiroka at the resort.
She looked younger than she was, and had a face similar to that of Tsuyako's; She was a beauty with red rose-like long hair.
That violent-tempered woman lashed out furiously at Fujino, stuffed the envelop in her hands to Fujino's face, and turned around to stormed off—
That letter contained the Will filled with the feelings of Hikaru's father.
The way Hiroka handed the letter over to Fujino was akin to her younger days, when she delivered her handwritten letter to the postbox outside the house of her first love.
"Mother still loves father, just as she did when she was young~"
Kazuaki noted with melancholy.
"So when Fujino gave birth to father's child, I suppose the one most relieved was Mother. I saw Mother sit on the bed alone when the DNA results came out, embracing the Bible on her chest with both hands, thanking away with tears 'Thank you, God'."
Kazuaki again lifted the bridge of his glasses, still maintaining that melancholic figure.
Koremitsu too felt his chest tighten once he heard those words.
When he was at the resort, Hiroka admonished Fujino thoroughly for not returning even though her husband was in critical health.
Hiroka knew that she was incapable of being a replacement for the beloved to Hikaru's father, Kiriyo, and perhaps, she was hoping for Fujino to be by the side of Hikaru's father.
"I really cannot deal with my mother. She has an eccentric personality, and irascible in personality she is; she probably thinks of me as a tool to leash father down. But even so, when I look at her, I feel a little itchy within. This

is why I came here to talk with this about you~. This is all. I shall prepare for a lonely vacation to refresh myself."
Kazuaki ended this conclusion briefly, and adjusted his glasses, lowering his head.
His mother was still a woman after all. Koremitsu began to think of his own mother, how this woman, a conflicted person, was someone Koremitsu had a tough time dealing with. Perhaps he was grasping an inexplicable sense of forgiveness however…
Kazuaki might have been feeling spiteful yet forgiving at the same time.
"…Sorry for being unable to go on vacation with you."
Once Koremitsu muttered this,
"Well, that is fine. I just need you to accompany me and see the Tulips in spring after all."
He said as he got into the car, poking his head out from the window, and finally,
"But personally, I do find it a tragedy that the child that was born was not Hikaru's."
After ending this with a tragic note, he left.
Koremitsu looked back, and found Hikaru too to have an anguished face.
"Miss Hiroka probably wished to be with Father all this time, I suppose…"
He muttered.
Koremitsu too gave a frown.
"Let's go. We got to get a present for Shiiko. In the meantime, help me choose a present for Shikibu too. Without you around, I don't know what sort of things girls will like."
While Koremitsu noted this anxiously, Hikaru's face too beamed as he followed.
"Yes. Let us choose presents that will delight both Shiiko and Miss Shikibu."
His voice clearly benign, Hikaru's eyes began to sparkle, and Koremitsu felt a shrill feeling in his chest.
"There is still 3 days till Christmas. I thought it will take some time, but time really passes by quickly."
"I guess…"
"We have the Christmas tree decorated, and we ordered the cake and turkey; we are going to buy gifts today, so I will say we are completely done with the preparations."
Why was there an abrupt forlorn feeling when he heard Hikaru's voice?
Hikaru was supposedly chatting away excitedly.
Was it because Christmas was approaching?
(Once Christmas is over, will this guy…?)
Koremitsu felt his chest gripped, and Hikaru cheerfully spoke,
"Hey, Koremitsu, do you mind accompanying me tomorrow for the entire day?"
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It was 2 days before Christmas Day.
The morning sky of the 23rd was a clear blue.
The weather report noted that it was likely to snow in the afternoon, and that the white Christmas might come early.
The place Koremitsu got to early was the Church he visited with Hikaru.
Once the sermon was over, he found Sora, who was serving at the Church as a volunteer.
“Yo.”
He called out, and Sora’s face immediately glowed.
“Mr Akagi! It has been a while!”
Her hair was cut short, and she looked prettier than before. Most importantly, her face was vibrant.
“I’m going to Italy for studies next year, taking theology, and at the same time, visiting the Churches and the art galleries! I will send you some picture postcards too, Mr Akagi.”
She began to talk about some things that will happen in the future.
Hikaru too listened cheerfully as he waited beside Koremitsu, and when they went their seperate ways.

“Farewell, Sora.”

He spoke with a tender voice.
The duo then went to the cafe where Aoi worked at.
It was Aoi’s rest day, but the pretty girl with long black hair was already there, covering her nose with a wet wipe.
“Sorry for making you wait, Beni.”
“No…I-I was here early. It was cold outside, so I entered this warm caf, and my nose got red again.”
Beni covered her face, looking a little flustered.
“It’s fine. That red nose of yours is rather cute too.”
“Y-yes…well, you already have a girlfriend, Mr Akagi. You cannot be saying such things! That will cause misunderstandings! But, thank you.”
Beni, who was so bashful to meet anyone at first, was able to converse with Koremitsu normally.
“I’ll take note next time.” Koremitsu noted, and rubbed his temples.
Having been used to Hikaru’s style of greeting, he was feeling numb inside.
He did not want to end up like this with Honoka too.
After asking Beni on what she had been doing, her iconic nose got redder,
“Miss Tayū will be coming to spend the night with me on the Eve, and my classmates will be here the next day. We will have Christmas party then, and she will helping too.”
She answered heartily.
“Well, as expected of the Safflower. You made other friends too.”
“Yes, it is due to Miss Tayū’s help. And thanks to Mr Polar Star and you, Mr Akagi.”

Beni then excitedly talked about what they were going to do at the party, and once she said that she had plans on the next day, she stood up.
While Beni was being animated, Hikaru, being right beside Koremitsu, beamed with a tender expression.
“Farewell, Miss Saffloer.”
He muttered with the same tone as he showed in his expression.
“Where are we going next?”
Koremitsu asked, and Hikaru beamed, answering,
“To the Asagao Princess.”

“My my, Mr Akagi, you really had the heart to come visit me.”
Orime Gonomiya, dubbed the Asagao Princess, was in Gonomiya Residence that was surrounded by tall fences, smiling as she welcomed Koremitsu in.
It was noon, so they had lunch in the guest room facing the greenery. On the menu was a variety of refreshing foods including fragrant, grilled salmon kasuduke, turnip and cucumber pickles, steamed radish with grapefruit miso marinated on it, and clam soup. Orime too was enjoying her food with
Koremitsu.
“I will be having a great-grandson in the summer.”
“Eh? Is that so? So your grandson and his wife have a kid now, Granny?”
“Yeah. It appears that they have realized that they are parents, and they do try to abide by what i teach them. They will try to find loopholes and fool me from time to time, but I intend to be strict with them, and train them little by little. My life has yet to end after all.”
Orime beamed, and Hikaru watched her with calm eyes.
After the meal, Orime chirped,
“Miss Asai will be here later.”
(Ack, Saiga’s coming!?)
For some reason, after Koremitsu and Honoka began dating, Asai’s attitude towards Koremitsu was as aloof as before, and it was troubling to the latter.
“Well then, I’ll get going, Granny.”
Hikaru then voiced out to stop Koremitsu.
“Wait, Koremitsu. Let us meet Asa too. I do intend to meet her later.”
(Wait, are you serious?)
Koremitsu again sat down.
“No, I guess I’ll continue to sit for a while.”
Soon after, Asai appeared.
Once she saw Koremitsu, her face froze, and then, she gave a little frown.
(See. She’s angry again. I don’t know why though…)
That was her default look as time passed, and she hardly talked with Koremitsu.
But when Koremitsu got up to leave the Gonomiyas with Asai, Orime whispered,
“Do try to get along with Miss Asai.”

Hikaru beamed as he turned back to watch Orime while the latter sent the duo off, and whispered,
“Farewell, Madam Orime.”

Koremitsu was frowning more than before, and walked alongside the silent Asai in the tranquil residential area.
He knew that Asai was not a bad person, but could she at least change that aloof attitude of hers? How was he supposed to ‘get along’ with Asai?
While Koremitsu was pondering, Asai said,
“Mr Akagi, I have something to say.”
Asai stared forward, her tone forced, and it appeared what she was to say next was arduous to her. At the next instance, her tone sharpened again,
“No, I shall not talk about it.”
She showed a red face to a dumbfounded Koremitsu.
“My preparations are only half-done at this point, so it is not perfect—how can I allow Aoi to simply comfort me?”
She just said some bewildering matters to him.
“Anyway, you cannot fool around with your girlfriend too much just because it is winter break, Mr Akagi.”
She glared at Koremitsu, and turned her face away, before striding away.
“What was that about…?”
While Koremitsu remained dumbfounded, Hikaru drifted by the side, giving a little snicker as he muttered,
“Farewell, Asa. I hope that you will be able to convey your feelings honestly one day.”
Koremitsu turned to the side, and was taken aback when he found Hikaru’s profile to be more transparent than usual.
“Hikaru…what…”
(He’s body is becoming transparent? From when?)
Entering December, Koremitsu had a feeling that Hikaru’s presence was becoming more faint than before.
Back then, whenever Koremitsu talked to anyone, Hikaru would then drift to the front to interject, and voice his displeasure. Recently however, there was an increasing occurrence of him staying behind Koremitsu.
Whenever they were alone, Hikaru would cheerfully chirp on his floral knowledge, and so Koremitsu decided not to pay heed to it. He assumed that Hikaru would be worried since he had a girlfriend.
But,
In the clear, afternoon sun, Hikaru lips curled into a beautiful smile, and he stared at Koremitsu with clear eyes.
Koremitsu swallowed down the words he was about to say, for he felt that if he was to affirm this with Hikaru, he would hear an answer he did not want.
Hikaru calmly noted,
“Shall we go to school, Koremitsu? —I do wish to view the flowers.”
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It was the start of winter break, and the school was dead silent, with nary a soul.

The cherry blossom trees at both sides of the main entrance would take some time before they would sprout, and at this moment, only the brown twigs accompanied the frigid winds. The arch of roses by the yard and the rose garden within were completely devoid of color.

The twigs were barren, and the dirt covering the flowerbed showed no signs of any sprout.

Hikaru strolled through the bleak landscape that showed nary a flower, looking around with a doting, tender face, appearing to be seeing the blooming flowers.

“I heard that when the cherry blossoms are waiting to bloom, the branches will show a faint pink…like a girl ready to fall in love. At the end of March, surely its branches will be littered with flowers, cheering on those preparing to embark on a new journey, a new life. In May, the rose garden will surely be filled with haughty queens, every single flowers insisting that they wer ethe prettiest, lifting their heads proudly, blooming red, yellow and orange.

The flowerbed will also have Pansies, Marigolds and Kniphofias. The Leather flowers growing at the fences of the tennis courts will bloom too.”

Hikaru narrated cheerfully with his rich, sweet voice, his profile increasingly transparent. The faint brown hair looked blurred, the shoulders and limbs increasingly vague.

Hikaru too may have realized it.

But he chose not to say anything about the changes happening to his body, his face showing a warm face as he stared at the bare garden and the uneven black branches, being amped for this as he continued,

He proceeded through the school, exited the backyard, and arrived at the garden,

“There will be the cute white and orange Crocosmiiflora flowers by the feet, as adorable as the girls gossiping away! Elegant Lilies will bloom in the summer, along with the Water Lilies floating on the pond. The Chinese Trumpet Bells will bloom in a pretty, alluring manner as well.”

The clear sky was gradually shrouded by the covers, and the air was covered in a white mist. Hikaru’s body too appeared to melt within it, and it got blurry.

(Hikaru, now’s not the time to her you giggle and chat about flowers now, right? Your body’s definitely being weird.)

Koremitsu felt his throat shrink, his breathing difficult.

Hikaru too definitely realized that Koremitsu was pretending not to notice anything.

“The Golden Osmanthus will give off a sweet fragrance in the Autumn, the Cosmos will sway with the winds like an emotional maiden. There are also flowers that bloom in the winter, Koremitsu. Have a look.”

Hikaru was beaming brighter than before, and he pointed at the red Camellia.
“I do feel delighted every winter to be reunited with this old-fashioned flower.”
The grey clouds got thicker, and the coldness in the air increased. Hikaru’s body too became increasingly vague.
The faint brown hair was almost transparent.
Hikaru knelt in front of the Camellia, putting his hands on his cheeks as he beamed at it for a while.
“Koremitsu, Tsuyako should be in the clubroom. Let us go greet her.”
He looked composed, seemingly having braced himself.

Tsuyako was in the Japanese Dance clubroom, dressed in a vibrant scarlet kimono held together by a red sash, practising her dance. Once she saw Koremitsu, her eyes widened.
“What is the matter, Mr Akagi? You look really gloomy. Do you have any love troubles? Did you have a quarrel with Miss Shikibu?”
“…It’s nothing. I just want to cheer for you before you leave, senpai.”
Koremtisu could not let Tsuyako worry before she step on the stage.
Hikaru’s presence grew increasingly faint beside Koremitsu, and surely, the latter would not be happy about it.
Hikaru narrowed his eyes, seemingly staring at Tsuyako while her eyes dazzled.
Tsuyako’s face showed a smile.
“Thank you. I am a little nervous, actually, so can you cast a spell on me in Hikaru’s place? Or will your girlfriend be angry about that?”
Tsuyako reached her right hand out, the scarlet sleeve swaying elegantly in the air.
“Today’s…an exception.”
Koremitsu raised Tsuyako’s hand, and drew a large fully moon on her silky palm.
Tsuyako’s lips curled into a smile, and she gratefully whispered,
“Thank you. I will be able to give my best dance. Surely Hikaru is look at me, yes, in this sky…”
This thanksgiving did not seem to be for Koremitsu’s alone; it also included Hikaru.
Hikaru brought his face close to Tsuyako’s lip, gave a lips on her lips, and whispered,
“Farewell, Tsuyako. I hope that you can continue to dance proudly. I will be in the stars, applauding you before anyone else can.”

The sky grew darker once they exited the school, and the air cooled.
According to the news report, there might be snow at night.
Hikaru’s body was finally about to vanish, his legs were practically transparent, and he looked just like a ghost.

“It appears there is not much time left. Koremitsu, do you mind giving Yū a call? It really is impossible to head off to Australia now.”
Hikaru joked as he advanced towards the school gate.
Koremitsu again was so anxious his gut was aching, and he drew his phone out, giving Yū an international call.
The phone got through immediately, and a fleeting, feeble voice rang from the receiver.
“Mr Akagi…? I was shocked…”
“It’s a bit sudden…but I thought of you. You doing okay there?”
Like his conversation with Tsuyako, Koremitsu was trying his best to sound energetic, for Hikaru was smiling.
Yū probably was perturbed that Koremitsu was giving her a call, but she chirped,
“Yes…I am decorating the Christmas Tree now…it’s summer here, so there are lots of fist ornaments. They are very cute.”
With clear eyes, Hikaru showed a smile as he listened in on Yū’s dreamy, fleeting voice through his now-transparent ears.
“Farewell…Yū.”

After talking with Yū for about 3 minutes or so, Koremitsu walked down the dim riverbank. On Hikaru’s request, he gave Michiru a phone call.
Michiru sounded very surprised.
“Ehh? Mr Akagi? Why? Are you cheating? Hono is beside me. I’m going to tell her. Erm—Hono, Akagi wants to go on a date with me and not tell you about it.”
Honoka’s faltering shriek could be heard from the other end of the phone, and it was followed by Michiru’s teasing and Honoka’s refuting.
It sounded as though they were good friends having a little bicker. Surely Hikaru too felt the same, as he let out a hearty chuckle while eavesdropping on them.
Honoka was left flustered, and surely, she would be asking what the phone call was about…
“Farewell, Miss Hanasato, Miss Shikibu…I shall leave Koremitsu to both of you.”
Hikaru said, looking relieved.

After that, it was a call to Shioriko.
“Ah, Shiiko, I’ll be a little late later. Tell Koharu that you guys can start with dinner without me.”
“Eh? Big brother Koremitsu? What’s going on? You aren’t with Miss Shikibu now, right?”
“Shikibu’s out with her friend…”
“Hmm…”
Shioriko sounded displeased, before harping excitedly,

“Ah! I got some wonderful for you as a Christmas gift, big brother. Do look forward to it.”
“I see. Santa Claus will definitely give you a present.”
“Seriously? I’m not a kid who believes in Santa Claus! I’ll be looking forward to it though!”
Hikaru raised his lips and narrowed his eyes as he watched Koremitsu converse with Shiiko.
“Farewell, Shiiko. You have to be an outstanding, fine lady.”

The night sky of pitch darkness started to snow, and Koremitsu finally arrived at Aoi’s house.
He stood at the door, calling Aoi out. The latter was dressed in a long one-piece and a knitted cardigan, white breath coming from her mouth.
“Sorry to call you out in such a cold weather. I want to hand this to you.”
Koremitsu handed over a red Poinsettia he bought from the florist on the way here, and placed it in Aoi’s hands. The latter widened her eyes.
The Poinsettia had bright green leaves, and vibrant red leaves growing on those of them. It was weared in transparent cellophane used for gifting.
“Hikaru gives you these for Christmas every year, right? So this year…”
Aoi showed a tender expression filled with memories and sadness as she lowered her head at the Poinsettia.
She probably thought of Hikaru.
Hikaru too gave a melancholic, tender stare as he watched Aoi.
If he was still alive, he would probably be spending Christmas Eve with her too.
The snowflakes began to fall, draped on Aoi’s long black hair like stars ornaments, melting fleetingly.
Tears welled in Aoi’s eyes.
But she immediately lifted her head, smiling.
“Thank you. I will accept this and think of this as Hikaru’s final Christmas gift.”
“Yes,that shall be it.”
Hikaru smiled.
“Mr Akagi.”
Aoi embraced the pot of Poinsettia, her eyes sparkling as she spoke cheerfully,

“Goodbye.”

There was no way Aoi could see Hikaru, and she was just bidding farewell to Koremitsu, yet the latter was taken aback by those words.”
“Ah, yeah.”
Hikaru was so transparent the scenery behind him could be seen, and he stood beside Koremitsu as the latter whispered, tears welling in his eyes as he smiled,

“Farewell, Miss Aoi.”

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After leaving Aoi’s house, the duo walked past a few stations.

Soon, they arrived at a shopping street where the white snow fluttered. There were lightings of Santa Claus and the reindeers, shops had Christmass rings on them, and the melody of ‘Jingle Bells’ could be heard with the chimes of the ringing bells.

Hikaru’s lower body had completely vanished, his face and body so faint it was like a jellyfish drifting in the sea. His moments were limp and weak, and he appeared to sway if there was a breeze.

“It appears that I have to leave Earth now.”

Transparent as he was, Hikaru muttered at the cross junction devoid of crowds.

The asphalt with glass bottle fragments littered over them was glittering, and fine snow gently fell upon them.

“Nobody from the moon will be here to pick me up, but I have a feeling that my spirit is becoming increasingly faint.”

“Ugh…you’re not going to stay till Christmas?”

The feelings Koremitsu contained all this while suddenly rose to his throat, and his face was contorted as he groaned.

Koremitsu already had a premonition when Hikaru mentioned that he wanted to see Beni and Sora. Whenever he said ‘farewell’ so tenderly, Koremitsu was increasingly anxious, angsty, his throat being choked.

It doesn’t have to be this day, right? It’s Christmas two days later. It’s the Eve tomorrow. This is too sudden!

Hikaru too smiled forlornly.

“Yes, I do wish to celebrate Christmas with all of you. However, I am already

pleased to be planning this and that with you. We have chosen Shiiko’s gift, and you are spending the Eve with your girlfriend, so I have to let you two be alone. Miss Shikibu will be really pitiful to have a ghost haunting during the Eve.”

Hikaru’s presence was the reason why Koremitsu never did anything, not even a kiss, and the latter was troubled by it. At this point however, he was utterly heartbroken, tears welling in his eyes.

The melody of ‘Jingle Bells’ and the bell chimes echoed from the shopping street. It should be a hearty tune, but it sounded so painful to Koremitsu’s ears.

“Just hang on for another two days…go bid farewell to Shiiko. No need for the phone.”

Koremitsu eked his voice from his sizzling throat.

However, the top of Hikaru’s knees had vanished.

“I do find it a regret to be unable to say goodbye to Shiiko and Miss Hanasato…but I do not have my legs to support me anymore.”
“Stop being so cheery about it, you idiot.”
The tender snowflakes fluttered in the air, dampening Koremitsu’s cheeks and lips, permeating through the upper body of Hikaru.
The sky was pitch dark, the stars nowhere to be seen.
In its place were the glass fragments on the path, glittering like stars. The white snow silently landed on them.
“Thank you for everything.”
Hikaru muttered with a warm voice.
“The flowers I have in my garden will surely be more lively than when I was alive. It was all thanks to you, Koremitsu; you allowed my precious flowers to bloom, for you conveyed the important aspects to them in my stead.”
There appeared to be a garden appearing beside the now blurred Hikaru.
The pure Hollyhocks.
The fleeting Moonflowers.
The cute Comfreys.
The radiant red Weeping Cherry Blossoms.
The mysterious Safflower.
The proud Morning Glory.
The tender Broom Tree
The fragrant white Mandarin Orange flower.
And finally, the violet Wisteria that sways with the breeze, the petals slowly falling.
Hikaru stood in the middle, smiling, the golden, clear hair swaying with the breeze.

—I wish to give them a tender farewell.

Hikaru said these to Koremitsu.

—I wish for them to be far from pain and tears, headed towards the future with a cheerful heart I wish for them to have the best farewell.

Hikaru said that he had to douse the wilted flowers with lots and lots of water. With much seriousness, he said that the girls were all flowers.
The flowers Hikaru loved were all smiling blissfully. One would suppos they would continue to bloom with their might. The precious intangible Hikaru gifted them will continue to dazzle in their hearts.
“Thank you, Koremitsu. You are my hero.”
Hikaru’s figure in the snow became more blurred, and he was gradually fading.
“Thank you for meeting me again. Thank you for being my friend.”
Those were the words Koremitsu wanted to say.

Hikaru took the initiative to approach Koremitsu, whom others dubbed a wild dog, who never had single friend before then.
He sent the Magnolia to Koremitsu's ward room. He was willing to be Koremitsu's friend.
He'll be with me! He'll comfort me! He'll encourage me!
(This is the first time I am relied on by others, the first time someone is available to listen to my grumbles, someone I could chat with when going to and back from school, someone to fool around with—it's all the first time.)
Tears welled in Koremitsu's eyes, and he was left speechless.
The first friend Koremitsu made was vanishing with a slight smile.
He will vanish from this Earth.
Hikaru said before that he hoped for Koremitsu to smile and bid farewell when he embarks on the journey to space.
It is a promise.
(You're already making things difficult. H-how am I supposed to smile at this time!? You bastard—!)
Tears slid down the cheeks. The chest and throat were unbearable, pained.
(But this is my promise with you.)
For it was a friend's wish.
Koremitsu's eyes and lips exerted their all, and he smiled.
He wanted to tell his friend I really enjoyed my time with you! You gave me many memories! We're always friends!
Surely he was able to smile.
The moment Koremitsu smiled, Hikaru, giving a genial smile, suddenly scowled, the tears continuing to flow from his eyes. The tears filled Hikaru's face, his extraordinarily handsome face drubbed, and transparent tears fell to the floor with the snow.
But even so, Hikaru spoke with his rich, sweet voice. With that tender voice, he replied,
"Thank you. I really love all of you."
Koremitsu cried as he smiled.
Hikaru smiled as wept.
His profile vanished completely—leaving behind a genial, delightful voice that rang along wit the melody of 'Jingle Bells'.

"Thank you. Farewell."

Epilogue

The following year, Spring—

The Cherry Blossoms had wilted, and it was a warm day where one would sweat wearing a coat out.

Koremitsu had entered the second year of high school.

He made new friends in his new class, and during lunch break, was able to eat his meals with them, and chat with them.

Michiru was still his classmate, and unlike before when she was nominated to be the class representative, she nominated herself to be it. She also intended to run for the presidency of the student council, and requested, Mr Akagi, please help me with my speech.

He was streamed into a different class from Honoka, but the duo would meet after school at the Japanese dance clubroom, and they would leave school together, going on dates during vacations. They watched an action movie Koremitsu really liked, and this time, he was to accompany Honoka to watch the suspense-themed love story she liked.

“There’s a lot of amazing plot twists here. You don’t have to worry about being bored, Akagi.”

With their hands clasped with each other, Honoka spoke with a cheerful face.

She had her hair, usually let down, tied in a ponytail, and she was dressed in a long one-piece dress with frills on the hem. Whenever they went on dates, Honoka would wear clothes cuter than usual.

“You would praise me well, Akagi. That’s why I’m working hard here.”

She smiled cheerfully.

Koremitsu would usually be at a loss of words as to how to praise Honoka whenever they went on dates, but the friend who no longer existed did say before, “’Isn’t it good’ is a line that can only be said once. You have to praise girls well when they work hard to dress smart.”

Honoka started to chat happily about what happened in class.

(This girl’s always smiling now…back when we first met, her eyebrows were usually raised, and she was glaring at me.)

As he recalled how Hikaru said that the latter would help him search for a girlfriend who liked to smile, his eyes and lips naturally began to smile too.

And Honoka suddenly immediately looked up at Koremitsu, whispering bashfully,

“It seems you’ve been smiling a lot recently, Akagi. Your smiling face…is very gentle. I like it.”

—It seems that whenever you are with her, you too would be cheerful and uplifted, influenced to smile too.

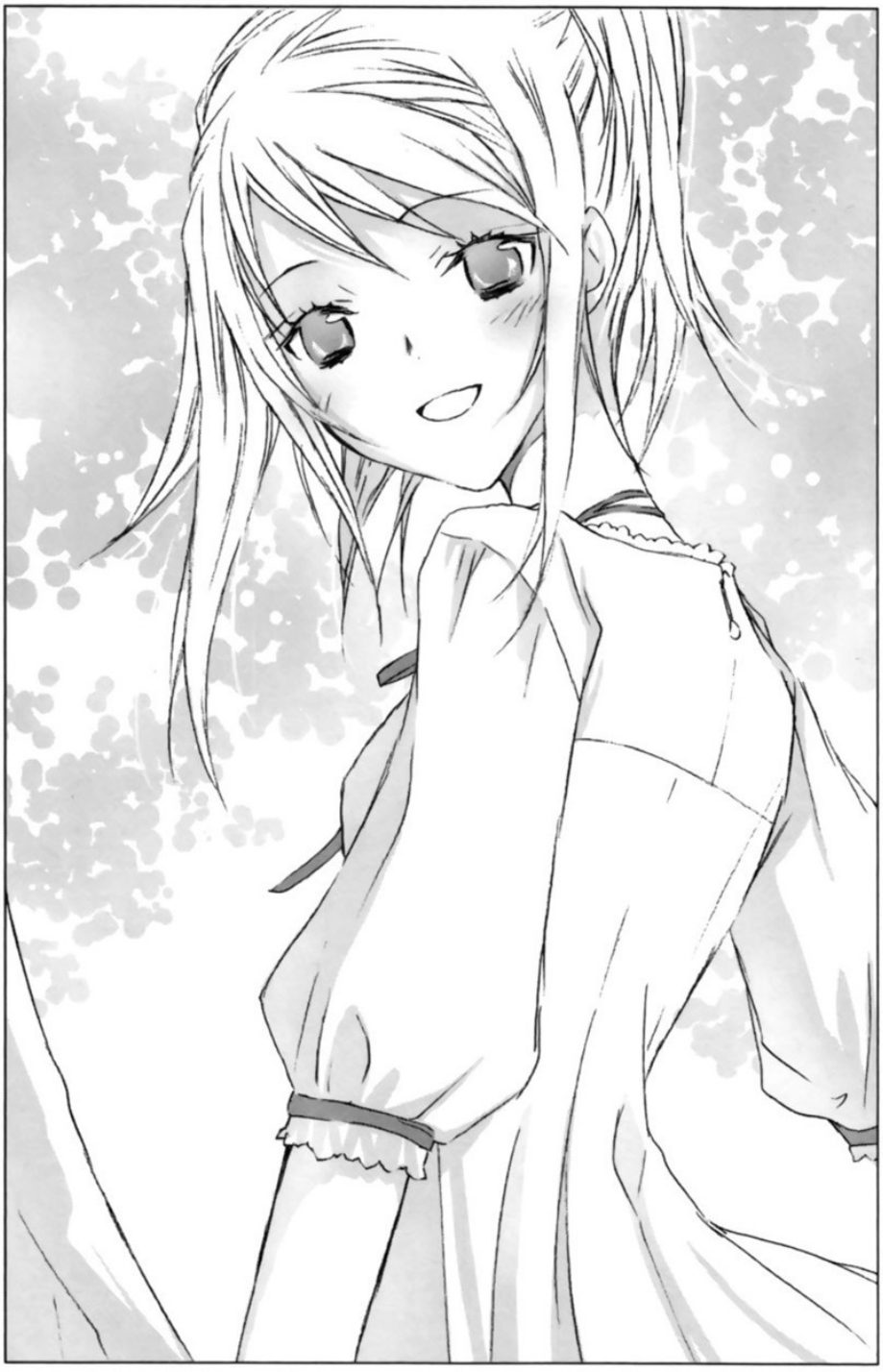
The rich sweet voice rang within his eyes.

A fiery lump rose up his throat, and used his hands to cover his face and lift it up.

“Hm, what’s the problem?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. I just so happened to think of a ghost.”

“What’s with about?”
Honoka spoke with interest. Koremitsu held his tears in, and then rubbed his hands that were on his face on Honoka’s cheeks.
“Let’s hurry. The movie’s about to start.”
Saying that, he walked away.
“Ah, you’re buffing me here! Is my foundation ruined? What about the rouge?”
One of these day, he would tell Honoka Hikaru’s matters.
The story of this important friend of me, who brought me a flower that likes to smile.
Yes. Perhaps that guy’s somewhere on this Earth.



—The next time, I will head to your classroom to borrow a textbook, Mr Akagi. When that comes, I have a request to ask of you.

Side Story 1: A Teary Christmas Eve

(You got to be kidding! Why is Akagi crying?)

While the chorus of the 4th movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony, 'Ode to Joy' echoed at the concert hall, Honoka was left dumbfounded as she saw the large tears trickle down Koremitsu's face.

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As high school freshmen, December 24th, the 1st Christmas Eve, was the first Eve Honoka and Koremitsu spent as lovers.

—R-remember to spare some time for the 24th.

Of course, Honoka was left dumbfounded that Koremitsu, who neither dated a girl nor showed any interest to such events, would say that to her with a blushing face.

She never expected that he would ask for a date on the Eve itself, and was wondering herself how she was supposed to mention this so naturally, if Koremitsu would find it annoying to have a date on the Eve itself.

And with Koremitsu actually taking the lead, Honoka's face, and even her ears, were left reddened. She answered.

—Y-yes…

What was more surprising however was that Koremitsu actually planned the route for their date.

It was a choice every girl yearned for, listening to the 9th Symphony, eating at a restarurant, watch the Christmas lights on the pretty, dolled up streets as they returned home.

And Koremitsu even told her to feel free to state whichever place she wished to go to, and there was no need to follow Koremitsu's own plan.

—No, I think this is good too! Aren't you forcing yourself, Akagi? Is this really fine? But speaking of which, how are you so certain about what a girl likes?

And while Honoka's eyes dazzled, Koremitsu scowled, stammering,

—Well, I got a friend…who's very clear on such stuff, very annoying in how he always tells me to do this and that. I'm not focusing myself here; it's my first time inviting a girlfriend out for a date on the Eve itself, so I guess it's refreshing…or rather, I want to try experiencing a normal date with you, Shikibu…well, such things aren't so bad after all.

Koremitsu apparently was bashful as his voice got softer, and he even turned his head away.
Did he actually have a bosom friend where they could discuss date routes? Were they the male classmates who often greeted him? Skepticism arose in Honoka, but the words ‘I want to try experiencing a normal date with you, Shikibu’ was too overpowering that it caused her hear to flutter, with no room to question.

—I’m happy…thanks. Let’s have some memories on the Eve itself.

She said, feeling really touched.
◇ ◇ ◇
(But why is Akagi crying as he hears this symphony?)
The singing and the orchestra reached the climax, yet Koremitsu was grittinng his teeth, tear-eyed as his fingers sank into the armrest of the seat, the gushing tears dripping onto his knees.
(It doesn’t sound like he’s moved to tears from the music itself.)
Koremitsu had been looking out of sorts when they met at the train station, their meeting place.
His eyes were red, his eyelids looked to have bawled out.
Honoka worriedly asked what happened to those eyes, and Koremitsu abruptedly answered,
“I didn’t sleep well last night…got tense waiting for the Eve.”
But surely Koremitsu’s eyes were not lacking in blood and deprived of sleep, and more importantly, he looked so downhearted.
Koremitsu was never a sociable one, and looked fuming all the time; it was the first time she had witnessed him looking so feeble and lethargic. He might have claimed that nothing happened, but Honoka was able to tell that there was something going on.
Once they entered the hall and sat down side by side, Honoka kept observing him, still worried about him.
Perhaps he wanted to hide his tears through the darkness as the audience area got dimmer after the performance began, or perhaps he was riveted to tears by the joy as the tears kept gushing out of his anguished eyes
(You’re really being weird here, Akagi!! What happened!?)
The concert was still going on, and Honoka could not assk as she grabbed Koremitsu’s by his hand on the armrest.
The large, icy, hard hand quivered in Honoka’s palm.
Perhaps he was shocked that Honoka realized he was sobbing.
(It’s fine.)
Honoka gently caressed his arm as she conveyed such words silently, and then, she held it firmly.
The sobbing eked from the throat, and Koremitsu lowered his head, wanting to hide his tears.
And his shoulders quivered as he let Honoka hold his hand, his voice

suppressed as he sobbed away.
◇ ◇ ◇
Once the concert ended, Honoka and Koremitsu sneaked into the crowd headed for the exit.
Koremitsu continued to hang his head.
“S-sorry…I didn’t expect it to be like this…I just wanted a normal date with you, Shikibu, spending the Eve together…but I…I’m…really sorry.”
Koremitsu did his best to eke a hoarse voice as he apologized.
(Akagi always hated to apologize and stuff like that.)
While holding in her exploding emotions, Honoka grasped Koremitsu’s hand firmly, saying with a tender voice,
“It’s fine.”
They were supposed to have dinner in a restaurant.
However, Koremitsu did not look prepared to enter the restaurant, for he did not have any appetite.
“Let’s have a little walk.”
Changing their plans, Honoka held Koremitsu by the hand as they strolled through the wide pathway flanked by trees, illuminated by lights.
The snow that fell the previous day melted due to the sun in the day.
The air was chilly, causing white breaths from anyone who breathed.
But Honoka did not find it chilly, perhaps because she was thoroughly worried about Koremitsu all over.
“Did something happen, Akagi?”
Honoka asked as they strolled.
Koremitsu did not speak up, and instead, he murmured.
“I won’t force you to say it out…but does it have anything to do with the call you gave Michiru yesterday…?”
The previous day, Honoka and Michiru went to a theme park together.
At the evening, Koremitsu gave Michiru a call,
And the latter teased Honoka, saying,
“Mr Akagi is cheating on you!”
After bidding farewell to Michiru, Honoka tried calling Koremitsu, but the latter never picked up his phone. She sent a message to inquire, and Koremitsu immediately sent one back.
“I’m not cheating on you. I’m looking forward to the date tomorrow. Don’t look forward to the date with your cheeks puffed.”
(What? I’m not doubting you here. I’m not that petty.)
Honoka felt miffed, yet at the same time, relieved.
But surely Koremitsu’s anguish must have somethijng to do that.
And perhaps Koremitsu was trying to encourage himself when he replied,
“Uu…”
Koremitsu was speechless.
But that surely was his response.
“It’s fine. You don’t have to say so.”
With a tender voice, Honoka gently held Koremitsu’s hand.

Koremitsu suddenly stopped in his tracks, stammering.
“Sh-Shikibu…I’m…really sorry.”
“Seriously, stop apologizing so much.”
Honoka said cheerfully, and shook the hands that were clasped together.
She then released her hand, and with both hands, cuddled Koremitsu’s lowered head.
His hair was as icy as the snow, so hard, with the stench of ink lingering.
“Hey, I’m really not angry at all. I just want to be with you since you’re so sad, Akagi.”
Back then, Honoka hid behind a building and witnessed Koremitsu holding Aoi by the hand as he wept, and Honoka herself had the urge to run over to him and comfort him, yet she could no. It was such a bitter, painful feeling that practically ripped her body in half.
Why was it that the hand Koremitsu held was not hers? She pondered about it, and felt anguish and despair.
At this point, Honoka was able to embrace Koremitsu and comfort him.
It was a little selfish, but she was extremely elated.
Surely, those words could never be said to Koremitsu himself.
That in the midst of this sadness and anguish, there was contentment for Honoka.
And no matter the suffering that befell Koremitsu, Honoka was able to take it all in.
“My friend…”
Koremitsu sputtered,
“My friend…he went to a place far away…I won’t…be able to meet that guy again.”
“Your friend went to a faraway place?”
Koremitsu remained silent.
And Honoka exerted strength in her arms as she coddled Koremitsu’s head firmly, rubbing her face on his icy hair.
Honoka did not know who Koremitsu’s friend was, and where he went.
And she did not know the reason why they would never meet again.
She just wanted to console and protect Koremitsu, anguished about the departure of his bosom friend.
“I won’t be going anywhere. I’ll always be with you, Akagi, always being your Heliotrope.”
Honoka repeated over and over again.
The reindeer and Santa Claus lights above them continued to flicker silently.
And the passers-by by did not simply stop by to stare at them as Honoka contineud to embrace him.
Koremitsu continued to snivel as he handed Honoka her Christmas present.
And Honoka too presented her present to Koremitsu.
Honoka’s present was a muffler, and Koremitsu’s was a little silver 5-sided star pendant.

With gaudy hands, Koremitsu put the pendant on Honoka.
“It’s cute, thanks.”
He stared at her beaming face, and then stared at the dangling pendant intently, before tears of nostalgic seeped out of his eyes again.
And while Koremitsu continued to rub his tears off, Honoka wrapped the muffler around him.
Suddenly, something icy landed on her nose. It was snow.
The snowflakes were like feathers amidst the colorful lights, fluttering gently.
Koremitsu wordlessly embraced Honoka, and with an unrestrained, gasping voice, he said,
“It’s great…to have you around, Shikibu.”
Honoka too reached her arms to embrace him back, wanting to provide some warmth to this gruff, sturdy and icy body.

The white snow descended slowly.
For some reason, Honoka thought of the lyrics to the Ode of Joy, the people who obtained the irreplaceable friends and lovers.
And these fluttering snowflakes were practically Christmas gifts from the heavens.
With such thoughts and sweet anguish, she continued to quiver and embrace her wounded lover.

Side Story 2: The Flawed Secret Room, Koremitsu and Honoka’s After Story

“I guess we shouldn’t be studying at my house after all.”
“Eh? Your house isn’t convenient, Akagi? How about coming to my house then?”
“No, your house isn’t good either.”
It was a certain day in May, after school, when Koremitsu and Honoka had this conversation.
It had been more than half a year since both of them went dating.
Once they entered their second years, they were streamed into different classes, but they attended the same club, and went home together.
It was right before their mid-terms, and all club activities were suspended.
They were already revising the contents of their lessons since two days ago.
They were planning to head to Koremitsu’s house on this day…
“Why is it that your house and mine are a no go, Akagi? Is there something urgent?”
While Honoka leaned her body forward to inquire, Koremitsu averted his eyes in a gaudy manner.
“Eh…it’s not much, but how about we go to the library instead? The atmosphere there’s more comfortable.”
“Why? Why not at our homes?”
Feeling unconvinced, she inched in on Koremitsu little by little.
Given her feisty personality, it appeared that she would not give in easily.

And upon seeing him panic, she was curious as to what he was hiding in his words.
“Hm? Why? Why’s it more relaxing in the library?”
The passing students watched the heinous-looking, savage eyed Koremitsu let out a weird cry as he got cornered by Honoka.
“Isn’t Koremitsu Akagi that delinquent king. I heard that he can talk to that third year, President Saiga on equal standing without flinching, but he’s actually so weak against his girlfriend.”
“Yeah, he does have some unexpected cute charms.”
After hearing others comment, Koremitsu’s face sizzled.
(Hey! Who’s the cute one!)
Perhaps he would send others scurrying in fear if he was to glare back and bark like he used to do, so he chose to retain the words in his heart.
More importantly, he had to convince Honoka.
While Honoka raised her eyebrows and glared back, Koremitsu tried to appease her,
“Well, if you come to my house, Shiiko will always play pranks on you, and we can’t settle down.”
Shioriko was staying at the Akagis, and was like a little sister to Koremitsu. Even till this point, she was peeved that Honoka became Koremitsu’s girlfriend, and whenever Honoka visited them, Shioriko would spy on them every 10 minutes, even spiking Honoka’s tea with chilli peppers or wasabi. Whenever Koremitsu chided her, Shioriko would complain with teary eyes,
“But you promised to make Shiiko a woman, big brother. Miss Shikibu’s just someone who dares to add pepper powder on tempura and eat spicy curry here. She’s not a match for you, big brother! Adding pepper powder into the tea’s not a big ddeal for someone with numb tastes.”
Shioriko caused Koremitsu much distress.
However, Honoka in turn did repay Shioriko once with Siewmai filled with mustard.
“I can’t be losing to an elementary school kid here. I do find something to be lacking if I’m not squabbling with Shiiko at your house, Akagi, and her pranks are starting to get stale.”
Surely Shioriko would be fuming mad if she was to hear those words.
“Ah, is that so? I guess that’s really amazing. Don’t you find it annoying to see the Third Princess?”
“Isn’t a chameleon cute?”
“I-is that so?”
Koremitsu stared back at the stoic chameleon, wondering whether Honoka was really thinking that the chameleon was cute. Recently however, Koremitsu himself was starting to develop feelings for her.
“And so? Even if you do use Shiiko and 3rd Princess as an excuse for not going to your hourse, why can’t we go to my house, Akagi?”
“Won’t your family be worried letting a delinquent like me into the house, Shikibu?”

“But you’re not a delinquent. Mom was stunned at first, but she does like you after knowing that you’re very polite.”
It seemed Koremitsu’s repair of the damaged shelf caused Honoka’s mother to sweep off her prior impression. This made Koremitsu happy too.
“My little brother really respects you, and he’s always standing in front of a mirror, trying to imitate how you glare at others.”
“Stop him already!!”
Honoka’s little brother was an 8th grader, and loved fighting manga. He seeked the path of the strong in his judo club, and so he really admired Koremitsu for being able to be authoritative just by standing around.
Whenever Koremitsu appeared in Honoka’s house,
“Yo! Bro Akagi!”
Her little brother would greet him as such.
Koremitsu was delighted that Honoka’s brother would call him as such, but he certainly wished that the latter would not assume that he was a delinquent boss.
“You haven’t met my dad yet, Akagi, but he’s usually not at home. Anyway, my family won’t hate you here!”
“Got it. Sorry about that. Your family’s very welcoming of me, even adding chilli powder into my tea.”
Koremitsu apologized for his words beforehand, and Honoka lifted her nose to snort, proudly humming.
“Right, there’s no reason why we can’t go to any of our houses to study. Now then, why aren’t you willing to study at home?”
Saying that, Honoka closed in on him again.
(Argh, damn it.)
“I’m scared that I’ll do something bad when I’m with you.”
“Ack..”
This time, Honoka was left speechless.
Their eyes met, and Honoka’s face slowly flushed, while Koremitsu scowled, trying to hide his embarrassment.
“I’ll feel angsty whenever I’m in a cramped place with you, and I just feel perverted inside. You’re just reading your notes so defenselessly, giving off a nice smell, and r-recently, you’ve been looking rather sexy. I guess I won’t be satisfied with kissing alone.”
“!”
Honoka’s face was completely beetroot.
And upon seeing that, Koremitsu’s face too was practically boiling away.
“That’s why, in other words…I really do treasure you.”
With a blushing face,
“O-okay.”
Honoka nodded in agreement of Koremitsu’s words, and she lowered her head, her lips curling.
“Thanks. I’ll treasure you well too.”
“Y-yeah!”

Koremitsu too answered tensely. It appeared that Honoka understood his intentions…
“Alright, let’s go to the library then.”
He suddenly butted in, trying to hide his embarrassement as he tried to walk off, only to be stopped by Honoka tugging at his sleeve.
“No, let’s go to your house then.”
“Eh? Didn’t you hear those shameless things I just said?”
Honoka then grinned.
“It’s fine. Shiiko will come disturb us every 10 minutes or so, so I’ll feel safe even if you start to get rowdy.”
(Now that she mentioned it…that’s how it is.)
And just when Koremitsu was enlightened,
Honoka suddenly approached him, whispering at his ear,
“And I do like flirting with you when the both of us are studying alone at home.”
Koremitsu heart practically jumped out once she said that.
“Let’s go then.”
After saying that, Honoka beamed as she went forth.
(This is bad, Hikaru. I guess I can’t hang on for 10 short minutes myself.)
Koremitsu grumbled quietly as he watched her back.

Afterword

Hello, this is Mizuki Nomura.
The series ‘When Hikaru was on the Earth……’ finally ends at the final volume ‘Fujitsubo’. Whenever I write a new story, I will first think of the ending, before working my way to the end.
My heart really pounds when whenever I write, thinking about how to reach the end, to meet the expected number of volumes, and to see the readers’ satisfaction at the end. Once I do manage to reach the destination, I will heave a sigh of relief, going ‘Ahh, thank goodness’.
Thanks to everyone, the ‘Hikaru’ series managed to end without a hitch.
I really do wish to thank all the readers who sent their messages, the readers who helped promote the books, and the readers who bought the bookson the days the volumes were released. I will like to earnestly thank all the readers who kept reading the ‘Hikaru’ series and supported this work.
The plot of ‘When Hikaru was on the Earth…’ includes the ‘Genji Monogatari’, and also ‘the Little Prince’ by Saint Exupery. The biggest hint would be the ‘smiling flower’. Well, the Prince is the star that gives me the ‘smile’.
Hikaru gave a smiling flower to Koremitsu.
The child Fujino gave birth to is named ‘Kaoru’, not ‘Izumi’.
Hikaru never left anything tangible behind, but he bade farewell, leaving behind many ethereal things.
I hope this is the kind of story I wrote.
There will be a new series starting from the upcoming 31st May.

The title is, “You Who Became a Vampire Begi an Eternal Love’.
It is the story of a boy who became a vampire, fell in love, felt conflicted within, and continued to move forward. It is a slightly depressing story.
In the month after, on 30th June, there will be a one-shot released, ‘Riku and Chise ~ The Boy who distributed the leaflets of the world, and the girl in the resort’.
This is a story I really, really want to wriite, and now it finally happened. It is a plain story, but an important start-off story for me.
Currently, there is a campaign wherein that any reader who buys the three stories, including the last ‘Hikaru’ volume, will be gifted a book containing side stories and design illustrations, so do participate in it. It really is just a little, but I do wish to write a story of Koremitsu and Honoka spending Christmas Eve together.
Now thehn, I do hope that we will meet in the next month, or the month after that.
February 7th, 2014 (Volume was released in April)
Mizuki Nomura

あと描き。

本当にそんなに経ったのだろうかと
1巻のおくづけをたしかめてしまった、
あっという間の3年でした。
描けて良かったです。

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